SPICY WESTERN STORIES

★ FEB. 25¢

SIX-GUN WEDDING

by Larry Dunn

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THAT'S TOO BAD. MY JOHN'S ALWAYS FULL OF PEP.
JANE SAYS THAT JOHN'S NEVER TIRED IN THE EVENING.
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JOHN'S ADVICE • JIM GOT A "TRIM-SHAPE"
SAY, JOHN, HOW DO YOU KEEP YOUR ATHLETIC FORM AND PEP?
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JIM, YOU'RE A CHANGED MAN!
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SPICY · WESTERN · STORIES

February, 1941 Vol. 7, No. 3

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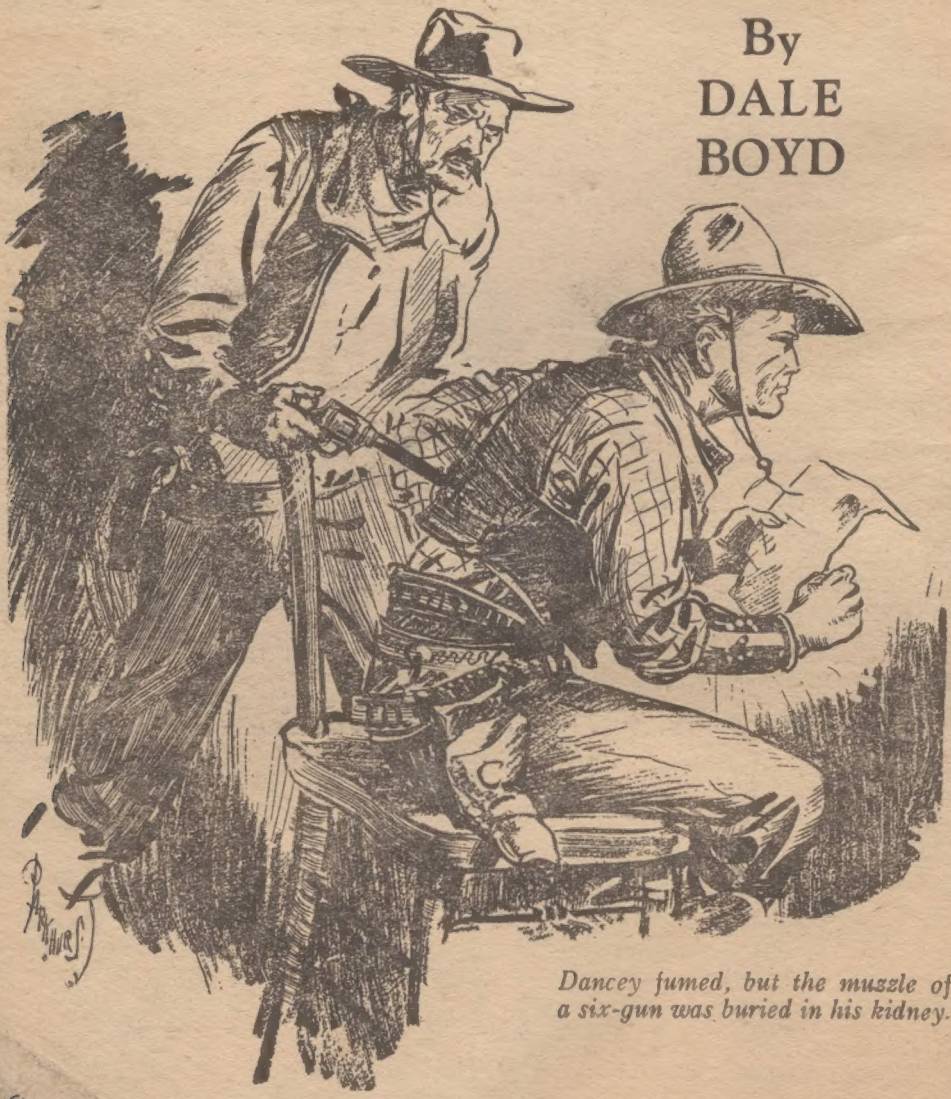
SHOTGUN

By DALE BOYD

FROM the bluffs above, the basin was, in truth, shaped as its name implied, like a gigantic hourglass. The solitary rider sat the grey horse at the edge of the bluff and looked north into the valley, north where the floor of the immense arroyo was a sea of green, heavy with buffalo grass, spotted with clumps of shade trees denoting springs. Far back in the distance against the northern-most hills the white box-like buildings of the Hourglass ranch could be seen. And in the space between the valley at the foot of the rider on the



Dancey fumed, but the muzzle of a six-gun was buried in his kidney.

SUE . . . .

bluff and the ranch buildings, literally thousands of blooded cattle could be seen.

Matt Dancey, cigarette dead between his thin, straight lips, looked upon this cattleman's paradise and frowned. His eye traveled south, past the desolate appearing little squatter's cabin crouching at the neck of the big gulch, where the larger halves came together, on to the broken country that was the floor of the south half of the valley. There was no ranch house visible in that wooded section, but Dancey knew there was one there,

It was a devil of a welcome for a man—to have a shotgun nearly blow his face off! But Dancey could take advantage even of that situation—when it was a girl who did the shooting! Still, a girl with a shotgun can't be fooled for long....

knew the southern half was the location of the Seven Up, Black Santee's horse ranch.

Black Santee! What a name. Dancey relaxed in the saddle, touched a match to the short quirly. All morning and most of the afternoon he had spent looking over the Hourglass Basin from the bluffs and hills above. Now he spoke aloud, as do so many men who ride the lonesome trails alone. "Funny," he mused, "damned funny. Brother Jack on his deathbed said the Hourglass might be a pig in a poke to me—that it hadn't paid a profit in four years. Mmmmmm. I see plenty of cows, plenty of grass, and plenty of water. But no profit? Giddap, paint pony!"

It took him nearly forty minutes to ride down the precipitous slope into the neck of the basin. For a moment he paused in a grove of cottonwoods, surprised. From the top of the cliffs he had missed most of the detail. Now he saw that what once had been a barn was a black mass of burned boards. The poles of a corral lay scattered about. Behind, barely in sight, stood a pair of moth-eaten ponies, hitched to a wired-up buckboard. The buckboard bore an equally battered trunk, a hatbox, and a pasteboard suitcase.

Dancey rode slowly through the cottonwoods and up to the front of the house. One of the ponies hitched to the buckboard whinnied, Matt Dancey's paint answered. Slowly Dancey slid from the saddle, groundhitched his pony, walked to the door and rapped. Only silence greeted him. He knocked again. There must be someone there, he reasoned, else the waiting team wouldn't be behind the house. After the second knock, he was positive he heard movement inside, the whisper of cautiously moving feet. Funny, he thought. He called, "Hey, inside there!"

THE whole door seemed to explode in his face. He felt himself being hurled backward, felt warm blood spouting from over his left eye.

Now Matt Dancey was a fighter, who had ridden the trails from Chihuahua to the Milk River, from the Hood to the Nueces. Every instinct, as he hit the ground, blinded by his own blood, was to scramble for cover. And yet he realized that he was stunned and dizzy, knew whoever had fired the shotgun had only to open the door and turn loose the other barrel! Consequently he managed to roll so that his body partially covered his right hand, clenched around the butt of his sixgun. He hoped he gave a good imitation of a dying man—he was damned sure he was bloody enough, although by now he knew a splinter had cut his eye rather than lethal lead.

The blasted door swung open, Dancey tensed. And a woman's hysterical voice called, "Damn you, damn you to hell! I was going, I was all packed, I'm changing my dress! I told you I'd shoot you if you bothered me again! I told you —my God!"

For evidently she recognized Matt as not being the man she thought he was. The gun clattered from her hands, she sprang through the doorway, knelt beside him. Dancey fought down his grin

of sheer delight. For she had been changing her dress all right! Her lithe body was only partially obscured by frilly undergarments, her legs shadowed by long hose that came high up on her white, white thighs. She leaned quickly over Dancey; he emitted another groan. As she turned and ran toward the house, Matt watched the quiver of her hips with intense satisfaction. Shoot him, would she! Shoot him!

She brought a tea towel, wringing wet and started bathing the blood from Matt's face, babbling over and over, "Don't be dead, don't be dead!" Her soft arm was beneath his neck, his check rested on softer flesh, palpitating flesh. Deliriously he murmrued, "Mother! Goodnight, mother goodnight!" He had only to turn his bloody face and strain slightly to kiss her full on the mouth. Then he pulled his A-Number One faint. She began to sob as she worked over him frantically. Then, arising, she put her hands beneath his arms and literally dragged him into the house. A moment later he sprawled in the bunk, muttering deliriously again.

First he insisted that mother hold his hand and let him die happy. Next he must hold mother and die happier. He chuckled to himself at "mother's" acquiescence, then quit chuckling as he felt the hard beat of her heart behind the soft mounds of her flattened breasts. A little ashamed, he fainted again. Through half closed eyes he saw her run across the room to a portmanteau, snatch out a white petticoat and tear it into narrow strips. The last light of the afternoon fell on her face as she worked. Her hair was the color of autumn corn, her eyes blue and long lashed, the bridge of her nose sprinkled with freckles.

Then she was back, bathing the blood from the shallow wound again. So engrossed was she in raising his head and bandaging him that she failed to heed her own appearance, or the fact that his eyes were now wide open.

"Please, ma'am, if I got to stay quiet, could you sort of fix that suspender over your shoulder?"

SHE sprang back, upsetting the basin of water, red engulfing her face and throat. Her mouth was open, her eyes wide, her entire body quivered with indignation. "You! You!" Evidently she couldn't find an epithet vile enough. She leaped for the door and the shotgun, a vision in silk and white velvet skin. But Matt Dancey had been expecting it. He beat her to it. He found it hard to hold off a wildcat with one hand and break a double barreled shotgun with the other in order to extract the shell. But he managed, tossing the shotgun behind him.

"Quit it now, ma'am, quit it! You're acting like a child, and you know what happens to children! What business did you have shooting at a plumb weary pilgrim through the door? What business —ouch!" That was when the toe of her pump caught him on the kneecap. His strong hands seized her shoulders. Before he realized it he was shaking her, shaking her hard and viciously. Both ashamed, she stood with bowed head before him, the brassiere dangling from her rounded shoulders, her round-

ed breasts heaving breathlessly.

"Look," he managed miserably, "I didn't mean—!" And for some curious reason he caught her to him, held her closely, kissed that corn-colored hair, then with fingers beneath her chin, kissed her full on the mouth. It was like kissing a rag doll. He felt like a dog. He turned and reeled out the door. Once in the saddle he heeled the paint pony about. The door was empty, but he called, "I shouldn't have done that, ma'am! I—"

Then he spurred the pony viciously and was tickled to death when it leaped wildly. Otherwise the blast of buckshot would have blown him clear out of the saddle. Once out of gunshot he slowed down and chuckled. "Horse," he said, "that lady is a wampus kitty. She can grab a new shell and stick it in a shotgun faster than anyone I ever saw. Well, we'll see *her* again, for we're sure coming back."

MATT DANCEY rode nearly sixty miles before sunup, for his plans required it. The town was Sand River, and because he didn't care for the telegraph operator's looks, and because he suspected the little cowpuncher with the crooked nose of following him incessantly, he found that wisdom counciled a stay of several days rather than a single day. For, instead of sending a wire to El Paso, he mailed a letter to his friend.

The three days passed in a hurry, for Dancey was a normal cowman. He gambled a bit, he drank more than he should, he fooled around with some of the dance hall girls. Strangely enough the girls left a worse taste in his mouth than the liquor. Often he wondered if it wasn't because of the shotgun lady back in the Hourglass. For Matt admitted to himself that he couldn't get the vision of her, or the memory of her kisses, out of his mind.

It was the third day when someone shot at him, right after he came out of the clothing store with his new outfit. The shot came out of the shadows of an alley. And, with the sound of it, Matt dove on his face and out of range. He didn't bother to go up the debris-littered alley—he knew it was useless to search for an unknown enemy in unknown surroundings. So he walked back to the Crystal Bar, took three quick drinks and acted very drunken.

Shortly, Crookednose came in, to stand down the bar and gaze sternly into his own whiskey. The big clock said five minutes until train time when Matt reeled toward the washroom. Beside Crookednose he put his left hand unsteadily on the bar, but the right, in the pocket of his store clothes, swung against Crookednose. An onlooker might have thought he was babbling drunkenly. But he was saying, "That's a derringer, pardner, so walk easy, back to the washroom."

Back in the washroom, Crookednose whined, "You ain't got no right to—!"

"To smell your gun?" taunted Dancey. "My, my, all loaded up with nice fresh shells and the barrel dirty as your mouth, which is some dirty. You been following me three days, mister. You got a dirty gun and somebody took a shot at

me. Ain't that coincidence for you?"

"I don't know what—!"

"What I'm going to do about it? Why, I'm going to take you with me, little chum! You even crack a smile when we walk through the bar and I burn you like the dog you are!"

Twenty minutes later, just before the conductor came for the tickets, two men stood on the rear platform of the train. The taller one said, "You're miles from no where in high-heel boots, fellow!" And there was a flurry of movement.

Back in the smoker the connie said conversationally, "Where's your friend, mister?"

And Matt Dancey said, "He always gets sick on trains. He should never ride them. He got off back there a piece." Then he turned to stare out the window.

CUSHING was the stop for the Hourglass Basin, and as Dancey left the train he walked like a

It was hard to hold a wildcat with one hand and break a shotgun with the other!

cat. Matt Dancey was expecting trouble and plenty of it. But for a while nothing happened. Where were Starling, or Starling's *segundo?* Starling was the manager of the Hourglass, left to Matt Dancey by his brother. Starling had been wired from El Paso that Dancey would arrive on this train to take over! But where—?

Across the street, to the west, was a three story structure whose sign proclaimed it to be the Cattleman's Hotel. From its door emerged a woman. She wore a short divided riding skirt, a wide belt that called attention to the lyre-like flare of her hips, and a man's silk shirt, open too low. She hurried swiftly across the street, every running step kicking the short skirt even higher, so that not only silken knees appeared alternately, but a full circle of white above those round knees. Breasts threatened to emerge from their thin silken covering at each step.

She came directly for Matt Dancey, whose mouth dropped open. She was pretty, damned pretty, olive of skin, with a red smudge for a mouth and a constant dare in her eyes. She said, "Mr. Dancey?" and when he nodded speechlessly, "Wasn't it silly of me, I was taking a bath and almost missed meeting you! I'm Rosa Sparling—Ross Sparling's sister!" She thrust out a pink palm, and it seemed to Matt that she held his hand longer than necessary, that her fingers pressed his. He couldn't help it, he was a male animal—there were the scent of bath crystals and perfume arising from that silken shirt, and his eyes were drawn like magnets to the deep, svelte valley between her half exposed breasts. He flushed when her eyes caught his, but her smile was enigmatic.

"Brother had such a lot of work to finish up—getting everything in order you know—that he can't make it until later. I told him I'd meet you for him and take care of you. Do you think I can do that successfully?"

He had an idea she could. She slid her arm through his and he picked up his grip. As they stepped off the wooden curb, she seemed to glance up at the hotel opposite. She screamed, "Down! Duck!" And throwing her soft body at him literally knocked him to his knees as a shot cracked out. At that he really thought he heard the whistle of the bullet going past his head! He jerked at the gun belted about him, and Rose Starling yipped, "Matt! Matt! They almost got you!"

She fainted, right in his arms.

No further shooting came from the hotel. A crowd collected, a man with a star said, "Better carry her over to the hotel, mister. Who shot at you?"

Dancey picked up the woman, growled, "How would I know? I just got here." He stalked over toward the hotel, an overalled urchin picking up his bag and following. A clerk was in the front door, a small clerk with a scent and a mustache. He hurried ahead of them up to room 202, arranged the bed daintily and tiptoed out. A moment later the urchin deposited the bag and, tipped, departed.

Matt Dancey leaned over the woman on the bed. The shirt, that damnable shirt was traveling, he thought grimly. The blue veined

mounds were half exposed, and when her eyelids fluttered, and her arm moved the shirt slid even further. He managed to turn and walk to the window. A moment later her shocked voice said, "Matt! Come away from that window. Don't you realize they almost got you? If I hadn't have seen the glint of the sun on the gun barrel!"

He turned. "Who almost got me?"

Now she had her hands on his shoulders. "Black Santee! Don't you know about him? How he's rustled Hourglass cattle for so long? How everyone is so scared of him and how he swears he'll have the Hourglass ranch if he has to burn it and everyone in it!"

SO that was the reason the Hourglass hadn't made any money? He shook his head. "I was with my brother when he died, Miss Starling. He was a pretty big man in this country you know—politics, cattle, banks and all." He grinned. "Me, I always been the rolling stone. My brother said the Hourglass hadn't made any money for some years, but he'd never been up there for four or five years himself. Maybe I better look this Santee up—I don't like potshots at me!"

"No, no! That's the way he fights. He wouldn't meet you man to man. You'd be drygulched. I promised my brother I'd keep you safely here until he arrived. Don't make me break my word! You owe me something!"

"I reckon you saved my life," he said slowly. "If them pretty eyes of yours hadn't have noticed the glint of the sun on that rifle barrel!" If there was mockery in his tones, she missed it. She was so close to him now that her breasts almost touched his chest. He turned away, reddening. "This here is pretty modern, isn't it?" He pointed to the crude wall phone, and winking at her, ordered a quart of whiskey.

"While it's coming," she smiled, "I'm going to finish that bath!" She disappeared. Dancey went back to the window, his shoulders shaking as if he were laughing. The whiskey arrived and was paid for, in fact the time was so long that he treated himself to a short one before she reentered.

She wore the most revealing negligee he had ever seen off the stage of a burleycue house. They drank together, they sat near each other —she being apparently oblivious of the fact that the loosely clasped negligee parted to reveal an expanse of cuticle that did tricks to Dancey's mounting temperature. She told how Black Santee had cut innumerable steers out of the Hourglass herd and taken them twenty-four miles across the border. He nodded, tried to look grim.

"He practically owns the town," she said bitterly. "The sheriff is his. all the merchants are for him because he takes his illy gotten gains and spends and spends and spends."

"That valley used to be open range," put in Matt. "My brother said there were seven or eight small farms—squatters."

"Santee's run them out, all of them! I tell you he wants the whole valley and all that's in it!"

And so they talked, until at last she said, "Couldn't we eat some-

thing, Matt?" Of course they could, and Matt used that modern telephone to order it.

He went back to the window and gazed down into the darkening street. He spoke about this—perhaps about that. A few moments later he said, "What time is your brother, Starling, coming in?"

He hadn't known she was so close. Her voice was right in his ear. "I hope not for a long time," she whispered softly. Startled, he turned. She whispered, "Matt! Matt! You're too young and fine to mix in this war! They'll get you in the back, like they did young Turner, one of those farmers! Why don't you sell out and go back to Mexico?" Her hands were on his shoulders, her eyelids fluttered. She added, "And take me with you!"

At first he thought he hadn't heard her! But there was no need for words when her arms slid about his shoulders, when she pulled him close and parted her lips for his kiss.

He thought he heard the knock. But he was still kissing her when the door opened. The first thing he saw was the loaded tray. He tried to pull from Rosa's embrace, found it impossible. The tray was followed by a woman. A wide eyed woman with corn colored hair and a sprinkle of freckles across her nose.

"I knocked," she said flatly, and her voice died away. Dancey managed to unwind the arms about his neck, his face brick red.

He said, "Shotgun Sue! What are you—?"

He thought then that never had he seen such an expression of utter hate and loathing come over such a lovely face! She said, "You! You!" Again as if she could not find expressions loathesome enough to express her thoughts. And it appeared to Matt that she wasn't glaring so much at him as at the half dressed woman standing so close beside him.

The face went stony. She walked across the room and put the tray on the table. Speechlessly Dancey laid money on the tray, speechlessly she picked it up and departed.

Rosa laughed. "I thought she'd have gone back to the district, where she belongs. My, she hates me!"

"Who is she?" he snapped.

"Her name is Sue, just as you called her. What did you mean, Shotgun Sue." He made a gesture with his hand. She shrugged. "I don't know her last name. She got her clutches in a young farmer named Turner—the same one that Santee had shot in the back—" Again that delicious and disturbing shudder that wracked soft flesh —"and lived with him quite a while. Turner began coming to see me and so she hates me. Men always tire of that class of women, don't they?"

SHE tried to put her arms around him again, but he made for the bottle. He took a long gulp from its neck, looked startled, said, "I'm going to be sick!" He ran blindly from the room, not into the bath, but into the hall. A moment later he went down the rear steps of the hotel, and into the restaurant. A startled Chinese did his curt bidding, and a moment later he was

looking into the scornful features of the girl, Sue.

He said, "I'm Matt Dancey. My brother left the Hourglass to me. I was looking it over privately when —when—" He fumbled for words.

She said scornfully. "That's fine. I'll go back to my work now and you go back to your play." His hand stopped her from moving back into the cafe.

"Now look," he pleaded, "how'd I know you or anyone else was going to walk in? That's my manager's sister, you know that." Her lips curled, she laughed. "You hadn't ought to be sore at me. After all, I've never been able to get you out of my—?"

"Not sore at you? When you're more or less responsible for Jim's death? When—?"

"Jim? I don't even know him!"

"Jim Turner!"

"Oh. Your boy friend—" He colored, dodged. She almost slapped him, but dropped her hand and shrugged hopelessly. He hurried

She screamed, "Down! Duck!" and threw herself against him.

on. "Listen, Santee had him shot! Santee wants me out of the way, just like Turner! Santee—!"

Her laughter stopped him. "Santee!" she giggled, "Santee!" She laughed until tears came into her eyes, rolled down her cheeks. He tired of that laughter, he took her shoulders. He might have shaken her—again.

But she said, "Go on, you're good at abusing women." He dropped her angrily.

"I don't blast through doors at utter strangers," he snapped.

"I wish to God I'd have hit you," she raged and walked away from him into the cafe.

Upstairs Rosa called from the bath, "Feel better? The clerk called up. My brother Ross is here."

ROSS SPARLING looked like a bulldog. His body was short and squat, his jowls wrinkled. He stuck out his head and Dancey was surprised at his grip. The two guns at his hips were out of character, too. They were gunman's guns, with smooth butts, the holsters thonged low on his thick thighs. Yet he sat in the lobby of the hotel and gave Dancey the same story Rosa had given him! That Black Santee owned the town and the sheriff, that Black Santee raided all the profits of the Hourglass every year, that Black Santee hired nothing but owlhooters and gunmen.

Starling nodded his great head when Rosa spoke of the shot from the hotel. He said grimly, "That's like Santee. Drygulching! But what can we do? I'll bet the sheriff didn't even search the hotel." He arose, slapping a quirt against his boots. "Well, three of the boys, Nig, Gus, and Shorty are waiting. Let's get on out to the house, if you're ready. No use even stopping for a drink. This is Santee's town—we'd have gunplay in the saloon. None of the Hourglass boys dare ride in alone. Let's don't ask for it."

THE moon was round as a fire balloon, the dusty road beneath their feet was a ribbon of white. Now, Matt Dancey was glad he'd looked over the basin before, triply glad. All the way out to the ranch and the basin he had trouble with the horse he was riding, although Starling assured him the horse was gentle enough. The closer they got to the basin the grimmer Dancey grew. Starling rode at his elbow, filling him full of the deviltries of Santee. And at long last they breasted a hill and looked down the road entering the valley between two buttes.

Suddenly his horse leaped, almost unseating Dancey. Starling whooped, the three cowboys, perhaps fifty yards in the rear whooped. And down toward the butte plunged the horse. Dancey weighed one hundred and seventy pounds, most of it bone and muscle. He applied every pound of it to the off rein of his horse, breathing a prayer that the reins wouldn't break. And he literally lifted that horse out of the road and up the steep bank, away from the gap between the two buttes.

Up he scrambled, like a frightened goat, and a shot rang out that spurred him to even greater efforts. Turning his head he saw the orange cones of gun fire be-

neath him, heard the whine of leaden messengers. Then the horse was up, the bluff top stretched away long and level, and Dancey gave him rein.

It was a good ten minutes, before, grinning wryly, Dancey pulled him down. He heard the drum of hooves behind him, waited, a gun in his hand. A rider appeared.

"Hold it, you're covered!"

"Dancey! Thank God, you're safe! I was afraid they'd gotten you!" It was Starling, and a moment later the rest of the party clattered up behind him.

"They got plumb away, boss," said the cowboy named Gus.

"The dirty dogs," added Shorty.

Nig spat disdainfully in the moonlight. "That Santee!"

But Rosa breathless and crying, had to be pulled away from Dancey.

At the house, Starling was in the lead. "Good God," he muttered, "look here."

It was a note pinned to the oak of the front door with a hunting knife. It read: "You, Dancey, we don't want your kind. This is your final warning. You Know Who."

Again Rosa began to cry. Starling stalked into the house to light the lamps. She stopped Dancey. "They'll kill you, they'll kill you! Don't stay, Matt. Take me with you, just you and I, let's get out of this!"

"Why would you go with me?"

She whispered, "You don't know what I put up with, darling. I was an adopted child and Ross never lets me forget it. My life is pure hell!"

She pressed herself close, wound her arms about his neck and kissed him. She loosed him when Ross Starling called from inside the house. The Chinese cook brought in the bottle, they all sat around, each drinking.

Starling said, "Well, I reckon you want to see the books, Dancey. They'll show up everything."

AFTER a while Dancey said, "For blooded stock this here is the smallest calf drop I ever saw."

Starling drank again, stared sullenly at Dancey. "Man has to do the best he can, mister. We're always short handed on account of Santee scaring all the boys away. Reckon I'm the only foreman that would have toughed it out this long." He drank again. "Matter of fact, your brother was about to give up. He offered me the whole ranch, lock, stock, and barrel for ten thousand cash money."

Rosa squeezed Dancey's hand.

Starling laughed. "Matter of fact I got the cash from the bank and brought it out here, just before your brother died. It's still in the safe."

Dancey said coldly, "The place is worth eight times that much!"

"Not with Santee over on the Seven Up, not with Santee owning and running the town. Why, man, he's got the whole basin bottled up."

Dancey arose and yawned. He said, "I'll have to look her over tomorrow, Starling, and maybe pay a call on this Santee. There's a couple of things—!"

And the glass in the window tinkled, the glass of the lamp chimney shattered and the flame went out.

(Continued on page 90)

SHE HERDED

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

SCOWLING, the boy from Georgia stamped out of his hotel room and down the hall. A straw colored cowlick reached to his china blue eyes; he was lean and long, and a black frock coat hung from his shoulders. He stopped at the door next to his own, tapped with a ham sized fist, and barged in without waiting for an answer.

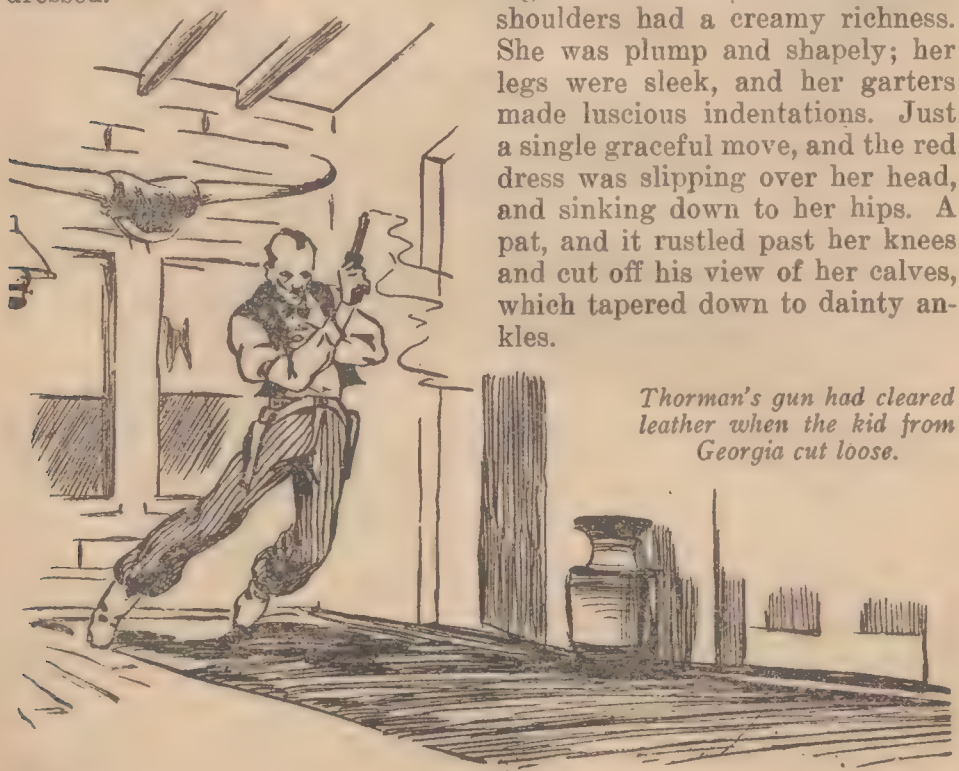
"Ain't no woman on earth can herd me around," he began.

The girl sitting in the rocker let out a yeep and cried, "Simon, you might wait to find out if I was dressed."

She bounded to her feet, and held a red silk dress in front of her to cover the most conspicuous bare spots. Simon Bolivar Grimes stuttered, "Dang it, Elma, how'd I know you'd be plump . . . ah . . . uncovered-like?"

He backed toward the door, but the dark haired girl said, "Might as well stay, if there's anything you've missed, I'd love to know what it is."

She turned her back, and proved her point. There was a fluff of chiffon about her hips; it didn't reach very low in one direction, or high in the other. Her back and shoulders had a creamy richness. She was plump and shapely; her legs were sleek, and her garters made luscious indentations. Just a single graceful move, and the red dress was slipping over her head, and sinking down to her hips. A pat, and it rustled past her knees and cut off his view of her calves, which tapered down to dainty ankles.



Thorman's gun had cleared leather when the kid from Georgia cut loose.

HIM AROUND

"Ain't no female can herd me around!" Grimes swore. But Elma was going to teach him different, with her insistence that he become a rancher instead of hunting for gold in Mexico

"How'd I know?" Grimes repeated.

"I guess you wouldn't." Elma sighed, then winced. "Ouch!" She picked a needle from the red dress. "Never occurred to you I'd have

to patch the only dress I have. And you're as ragged as I am, after riding a hundred miles in a frock coat!"

A frown again tightened Grimes' coffin-shaped face. "Look here, Elma, ain't no woman on earth can herd me around. I am damn-blasted if I aim to be a cowpuncher just account you got a notion I'm too dumb to reckonize gold if I stumbled over it."

"Simon, darling, I don't mean you're stupid. I mean, you just don't know a thing about mining. Anyway, mining towns are poison, and miners are the lousiest ruffians."

"Huh! When I found you, you was hustling drinks in a dance hall!"

Elma slapped him with both hands before he could dodge. "Yes, and I got you out of jail, I got you the horse you escaped on, and you were a small town lawyer when I found you, you long-legged idiot!"

She began crying, and clung to him. "Simon, mining towns are poison! Claim jumpers shot my dad. Anyway, your uncle's a cattleman, if you weren't so stubborn you and me could get a start with him."

"Aw, honey—" She was close enough now for him to be delightfully aware of her generous curves, and she snuggled closer; but the Grimes stubbornness won out. "Look here, I ain't got more'n a couple hundred dollars, and my uncle'd mock me, coming back thattaway, after I busted outen that jail wheah that crooked Jedge Hillman flung me fo' contempt of court. I got to get myself some gold, and I'm a-going to."

She jerked back, wiped her eyes. "Simon Bolivar Grimes, you weren't too proud to have me smuggle saws into the jail!"

THE boy from Georgia straightened up. He dug into his pocket and brought out a buckskin poke and emptied half the gold pieces on the dresser. "M'am, I am mighty sick of these here reminders." He looked at the heavy gold watch his grandpappy had given him just before he was hanged for shooting a revenue officer. "It is jest about time for the stage coach to get here. You kin keep both the hosses you got."

He turned to the hall. She snatched the coins, and flung them. They hit the panel, just as he closed the door behind him. "Ain't no woman herding me around," he repeated. He knew he'd miss Elma, and he had to build up his courage.

Grimes stepped into his room, and shouldered the saddle bags which contained his razor, a quart of whiskey, and a pair of field glasses. Then he went down the creaking stairs, and stood in the doorway.

Cowpunchers yelled when, a few minutes later, the stage came clattering down the dusty main street. Hostlers brought out the new relay, and took the sweating team to the stables. The driver leaped down,

N.B.: To this day, the management of certain mines in Mexico sends ladies and liquor to the mines: though to keep the miners from deserting, rather than to prevent "high-grading." And just last year, the F.B.I. nailed a gang that used an exhausted mine as a front for the disposal of illicit gold.

and so did the shotgun messenger who guarded the heavy box of gold coin. A blonde girl stepped from the stage.

There was a seductive rustle of skirts, a coy flash of shapely legs; the slanting rays of the sun twinkled on the sheer silk of her hosiery. The sweetness of her perfume warmed Grimes' heart; he felt a little less bleak inside.

Grimes watched her walk into the stage station. She lifted her skirts a little, and picked her way daintily across the dust and among the bottles and cigar butts that littered the dirt side walk; but she looked at home, for all her frilly garments and the little hat with the blue plume. Neither did she grimace when she entered the dingy dining room.

Gimes bought a ticket for Skull Gulch. He had barely stuffed a few ham sandwiches and a slab of apple pie into his coat pocket when it was time to board the coach. He held the door open for the fascinating stranger, and then followed her to the coach; now that she had walked the cramps out of her legs, she needed no assistance.

Grimes looked up at the window at the end of the second floor hallway of the hotel. He caught a glimpse of Elma, and for a moment, he felt like a skunk. Then he said to himself, "Ain't no woman kin herd me around."

He had half hoped she would fling her few odds and ends into her carpetbag and follow. But she had not, and it was too late to back down. Then the driver cracked the whip; the stage lurched forward, flinging the lovely blonde all over Grimes.

She had curves in the right places, even though her prim blouse hid them from the eye. The momentary pressure, the warm contact of her hand, the fragrance of her garments: they all made Grimes tingle down to his boots.

They were alone in the coach, but the girl might as well have been surrounded by a board fence. He could not get up his nerve to edge her into one corner and slip an arm about her; that puzzled Grimes, and fascinated him. She was sweet, and friendly, and she wasn't stand-offish, but he kept his hands clear.

He said, after the exchange of names followed the untangling of accidentally scrambled limbs, "Miss Anne, I knowed you belonged out here, the minute I seen you picking yo' way, calm and placid-like into that there station. Me, I'm a miner, but I usta practice law. I'm aiming to make a pile fo' myself at Skull Gulch."

Anne Parsell made a gesture of dismay. "Why, Simon, that's the murderingest town in Arizona."

"I reckon it ain't too wild," he answered, and hitched about a little, for the .45s in his leather lined hip pockets were a nuisance. Now that he was through being a lawyer, he'd wear his guns on belts again. "Anyways, a fellow can face a few risks for a saddle bag full of nuggets."

SHE laughed merrily. "Well, they do say gold is where you find it. You know, there's the New Golconda, where I live, in Broken Axe. For years, it's been completely played out. And do you know, now they're taking ore out

of it, so rich they don't let the miners leave the mine, or else they'd fill their boots with nuggets whenever they headed for town."

Gimes sat up straight. "Miss Anne, mebbe I been a mite hasty about Skull Gulch. Reckon I oughta go to Broken Axe instead."

"You won't get rich on miner's pay. Since you've practiced law, why don't you work in dad's bank?"

"Yo' pappy own a bank?"

"No, he's only president of it, Brad Thorman owns a bit of stock, and he wants to marry me, but he's old as the hills, I wouldn't be surprised if he's thirty-five."

It was dark now, and above the clatter of the stage, Grimes heard the yip-yip of a coyote, and the answering howl of another. Anne's profile was exquisite in the gloom. The noise made conversation lag. She sat up, lovely and straight; but finally, as the hours wore on, her lovely head nodded.

She leaned against the arm rest. She gasped, murmured an apology as a jolt flung her against Grimes, but she did not take her head from his shoulder. She pillowed her blonde curls against the black frock coat, and Grimes said to himself, "Jest like a dang-blasted angel, gosh, she's beautiful. . . ."

To hell with Skull Gulch! He was going to Broken Axe. He hoped Elma wouldn't follow him to Skull Gulch, it'd be too bad, going so far out of her way.

Grimes must have been dozing, for the screech of brakes startled him. Then there was a shot. Anne cried, "Good Lord, a hold-up!" Men yelled, rocks clattered down the moonlit slope of the pass. The guard cut loose with his carbine; and then a volley raked the coach.

The driver was trying to swing clear of boulders heaped in the trail. Grimes caught Anne by the shoulder and thrust her to the floor. "You scrunch down, honey," he yelled, and drew his .45s.

She cried, "Simon, you'll get killed—oh!"

Two slugs had zinged from bolts inside the coach. Grimes leaned out the window. Four men were pelting down the slope. Their horses struck fire from the rocks. Their guns blazed. The driver was whipping the team, sawing the lines, weaving in and out among the boulders, trying to get back on the trail. Grimes fired. A man slumped over in his saddle, then rolled off; his horse galloped with the others.

Then the messenger lurched from his post.

The lead team piled up. A horse screamed. Grimes yelled, "cut them loose, I'll hold these here ——s!" The driver answered, and Grimes' Colt blazed again.

The nearest road agent doubled up, clutched for support, and thumped to the ground. Grimes shouted to Anne, "Honey, get out on the other side, get outen here and hide yo'self afore you git a stray bullet."

And then a hammer blow knocked the breath out of Grimes. He had many times before now felt the paralyzing smash of a bullet, but this was different. He could not feel a thing from his collarbone to his knees; the moonlight blurred and blackened.

He never did know how long it was before he heard Anne cry,

"If ever I ketch that sculpin, I'm staking him out on a ant-hill. How's the hosses?"

"One kilt, I had to shoot t'other, whilst Miss Anne was looking for

She smacked Anne, and then Grimes was dragging her from the buggy.

"Oh, he's not hurt at all, really."

The driver, head bandaged, knelt beside her, with a lantern. Grimes sat up. "M'am, what in tunket you mean I ain't hurt none?"

"Why, the bullet hit the big gold watch in your vest pocket."

"They busted that heirloom," he muttered, looking at the wreckage.

bullet holes in your gizzard. And they got the gold."

Anne recoiled. "They got the gold? Oh, good Lord."

Grimes hoisted himself to the seat, and leaned back against the bullet riddled upholstery. "Huh! Tain't yo' gold, is it?"

AT THE next town, Ojo Caliente, the driver got a lead team; but Anne refused to go on. "Simon," she said, "you've got to see a doctor, you got an awful wallop, watch or no watch. And I'm going to stop over to see that you're taken care of."

Once the coach was on its way, Grimes muttered, "Shucks, nothing wrong with me, here I am letting a woman herd me around again."

Before he reached the head of the hotel stairs, he did think his gizzard had been knocked out of place; but he told the doctor, "Ain't nothing wrong with me, get me a quart of liquor and a cigar."

It was perhaps an hour or two before dawn when he awoke, a gun in each hand, and sweat pouring down his cheeks. He looked around, realized that he had been dreaming of a second hold-up, and took another swig of rye.

Then he heard the sobbing next door; Anne was crying, tossing restlessly. It was all plain through the thin partition. He got up, put on his boots and coat, and tapped at her door. When she answered, he said, "Honey, it's jest me. I done heard you weeping like yo' little heart's busted wide open."

"Oh, just a minute—" There was a flurry of bare feet, the scratch of a match; then, "Come in, Simon, I'm so worried."

She wore a filmy robe over a lace paneled gown; the two garments together wouldn't have been enough to wad a shotgun. Her hair was shimmering gold in the light of the smoky lamp. For all her reddened eyes, Anne was the loveliest creature he had ever seen; through the frail garments he could just distinguish the shadowy roundnesses of her slim figure.

He caught her in his arms, gritted his teeth for a moment, then let himself down into the rocker.

"It's that robbery," she said, snuggling against his shoulder.

"Huh. Tain't yo' money."

"But the loss will hurt dad's bank, there may be a run on it."

"Shucks, ain't the stage company responsible?"

She shook her head. "The bank owns the stage line."

Gimes stroked the golden hair, slipped an arm about Anne, and kissed her. She did not protest, and before he could marvel at that, she was clinging to him, murmuring, "Simon, when you were half conscious from trying to defend me from the road agents, you said the sweetest things."

That kiss inspired Grimes. "Honey, all the more reason fo' not working in yo' pappy's bank, and going to the New Golconda instead. I'll give him the gold, and I wont ask fo' my money until the bank's earnt enough to stand the loss of the robbery."

"Simon, darling, miners just get pay."

Grimes chuckled. "Not me. I'm a-filling my boots with nuggets every shift I work. They ain't

keeping me locked up at any mine!"

"Oh, but that'd be stealing."

"Huh. Tain't neither. It's downright stingy, expecting a fellow to dig and drill and blast all day long, and then holler if he stuffs a couple nuggets into his pockets. Did the owner of the New Golconda put the gold into the ground in the fust place? You jest hush up, honey, I'm saving yo' pappy's bank if I have to high grade two-three mines."

Anne didn't have an answer. Then he was kissing her until she couldn't say anything, for a while. At last Grimes said, "That there light's too dang glaring. . . ." He got up and blew it out. When he got back to the warm white shape in the gloom, he went on, "Who'd you say owns the New Galconda?"

"Brand Thorman."

"Huh. He's the gent that thinks he'll marry you!"

IT WAS dawn when Anne said, "Simon, you better go back to your room, folks might start talking."

He wrote a letter, telling Elma he was not going to Skull Gulch; but he did not tell her what his destination was. No woman was going to herd him around. . . .

When the following stage brought Grimes and Anne to Broken Axe, the town turned out. The marshal and half a dozen cowpunchers surrounded Grimes and Anne, demanding a first hand account of the vain but valiant defense of the coach. Anne's father, Jim Parsell, joined the crowd. He was a tall, ruddy man with a blonde mustache. He wore boots and store clothes, and a battered Stetson jammed down on shaggy white hair.

"Simon," he said, "I done heard all about it, and I'd sure like to have you be chief counsel for this here bank."

Grimes answered, "If it's jest the same to you, suh, I'm plumb sick of law and I'd ruther work in the New Golconda mine."

Anne said, "Dad, why don't you ask Brand, Simon was defending his interest, too. It was bank money."

"Well, I reckon I could, if Simon insists."

And then a dark man with a close-cropped mustache came up. His thumbs were hooked in his green satin vest; a good looking fellow, except for his gimlet eyes and too hearty smile. Anne said, "Hello, Brand, Dad and I would like for you to give Simon a job in your mine."

Brand Thorman cocked his head and eyed Grimes from dusty boots to bullet riddled hat. "So you're Simon Bolivar Grimes, the Texas gunslick, eh? Nice work, smoking out two road agents."

"Huh? What's that?" Grimes scowled; he didn't like the man. "I ain't no gunslick."

Thorman chuckled. "No offense, Simon, no offense. And I'm sorry, but I don't need any more miners, I've got plenty." He lifted his hat, "Good-bye, Anne."

Grimes watched him mount up the slim legged *palomino* in front of the Thorman House Bar. Then Anne's father said, "Simon, let's liquor up a bit, and see if I can talk you into working for me."

Anne cut in, "I wish you could persuade him, dad."

Though Grimes stepped into the Thorman House Bar, he was still determined not to have any woman herd him around.

After two or three quick ones, he said, "Look-ee here, Mistah Parsell, you got to get me into that mine, I'm plumb set on mining, I allus craved to learn the business." He omitted any mention of his plans for pocketing nuggets; he sensed that rugged Jim Parsell would have the same childish ideas that Anne had. "Though mebbe I ought to help the sheriff run down them robbers that ruined my grandpappy's watch."

Jim Parsell's craggy face tightened. "I'd sure love to see them dancing on the business end of a riata. Forty thousand bucks, and if the news gets out how hard we're hit, no telling what'll happen."

THE following morning, cattlemen came driving in to Broken Axe, supposedly to buy groceries; but each one went to the bank and drew out cash. Grimes watched Jim Parsell through the fly specked windows; the tall rancher was saying to each depositor, "Your *dinero's* safe, neighbor. But if you drag it down, you might get held up, same as the stage."

Parsell was sweating. Some depositors did return most of the money they had drawn, but some got stubborn. It was touch and go, all day.

Grimes was impatiently waiting for night. He and Anne were driving out on the mesa. She was bringing a lemon pie, some cushions, and a Navajo rug. Anne would pass by the hotel to pick him up.

Brand Thorman drove down the street in a buckboard, and pulled up in front of Cy Daley's General Mercantile, Hay, Grain & Feed Store. He did not notice Grimes, and Grimes barely noticed him; the passengers sitting on boxes set on the wagon bed accounted for that last.

There were two Mexican girls built like Percheron mares, three chemical blondes, and a red-head. They were painted up like a carnival parade, their perfume drowned the main street's odor of stale beer and horses, and their low cut dresses made Grimes gape.

The redhead said, "See anything you ain't seen before, dearie?"

Grimes answered, "Not yet, m'am, but if that there wagon hits any bumps, there's jest no telling."

She laughed, and patted the deeply cut yoke of her dress, just by way of checking up. One of the Mexican girls said, "*Señor,* you are too fonny!"

"Where you all ladies going, to a picnic or suthin?"

"Picnic?" A blonde turned to her nearest neighbor. "Sure, and he thinks it's a picnic, up there at the mine."

Then a little gray man with a blue apron came out of the store, carrying a case of whiskey. Brand Thorman followed, a case on his shoulder. Grimes asked the girl nearest the tailgate, "Gosh, m'am, is that there liquor for the miners?"

"Miners get thirsty, don't they? Listen, dearie, come up to see me Friday night, I live right next to the post office."

Thorman took the reins, and

rising from the desert. As he went to the hotel to wait for Anne, he said to himself, "No dang wonder these gals holler when a fellow aims to work in the mines. Some of them ladies was right pert looking, too."

As the car roared down, Grimes blazed away at the silhouetted gunners.

cracked the whip. The cargo of girls and whiskey rolled down the street. Grimes said to Cy Daley, "That gent sure treats his miners mighty nice."

The storekeeper said, "Finding nuggets the size of steers, he can damn' well afford to! It beats all, bub, the luck of some folks. Mine's been given up fer years, and Brand snoops around and finds the lost vein."

Grimes watched the dust cloud

He ate a steak and four eggs and half a dried-apple pie. But thinking of Elma took the edge from his appetite.

"After all," he said to himself, "she's got them two hosses, and I gave her half of my roll. No, I ain't being herded around by no woman."

It was dark now, but he sat there, trying to devise an approach to the problem of getting a job from a man who did not want more employees. Finally he brightened up: "If Thorman don't break all the likker out at once, which he wont, supposing I snuck in and opened a case? Them miners ain't going to know their own names fo' a week."

WHEN Anne Parsell drove up in her father's buggy, Grimes took the reins, and flicked the high stepping bay's rump. "Sure a scrumptious night, honey."

Anne sighed, leaned back against his shoulder.

Well out on the mesa, Grimes pulled up at a *tinaja* whose slow ooze of water filled a small rocky basin, just enough for the grass that covered the thin soil for a few yards about the basin. He spread out the Navajo rug, and Anne snuggled beside him, in the lee of the boulder that sheltered them from the cool wind.

The silence finally made him look up from the girl in his arms, for all that she clung to him, lips eager and misty eyes veiled by drooping lashes. "Gosh, honey, I could almost grab them stars, and put 'em in your hair."

She sighed ecstatically. "You're so poetic, Simon." And then, needing both arms, Gimes was unable to reach for the stars. . . .

The way it ended, he forgot all about the chicken sandwiches and the lemon pie until Anne exclaimed, "Oh, it's getting late, we ought to get back to town before everyone turns out for the westbound stage."

He helped her to her feet, sighed regretfully, and then became practical. "Better let me brush the burrs offen your skirt, honey."

There weren't any to speak of, but it was nice work.

On the way back to town, Grimes asked, "Why in tunket don't Thorman put up gold brick and save your pappy's bank?"

"He's offered to, if I'll marry him."

"That old buzzard, I bet he's dang neart forty. Your pap can't make you marry Thorman, can he?"

"Oh, it's not a case of *forcing* me to, Simon. But dad's worked so hard with that bank. He's carried so many ranchers through bad years. I just can't let him fail now. I'd be letting all our friends down."

Grimes flicked the whip. "Look here. Suppose you and me cut up so scandalous that Thorman'd not want to marry you, and then maybe your pappy could deal with him reasonable."

Her eyes brightened. "That would be fun, darling." But the smile faded quickly, and she let go his hand. "Only Thorman'd kill you. No, that's not the way—oh, hurry! Here comes the stage!"

He plied the whip. The bay stretched his long legs. The buggy bounced and careened over the rough road; but for all his gallant

effort, the stage beat Jim Parsell's trotter. And when Grimes pulled up, all of Broken Axe had turned out.

Grimes gave Anne the reins. "Shucks, mebbe we coulda made it through the arroyo instead of to town, I musta been absent-minded."

"I'm afraid not," Anne said. "Without going miles and miles around."

Even so, the late return might have been inconspicuous, but for one passenger who had stepped out of the stage. In another moment, she would have been in the hotel. As it was, she stood there under the lights at the door. Elma Austen had followed Grimes.

She saw him, and she saw his blonde companion. She dropped her carpetbag and darted toward the buggy. Grimes leaped to the street and said, "Anne, you hurry —"

The crowd, however, blocked her way, but it did not block Elma. She said, "You jailbird, maybe you think I didn't see this blonde bait get on the coach with you! Maybe you thought I'd not hear of that robbery, and know where you'd gone?"

She bounded to the step of the buggy, and said to Anne, "If you think you can take advantage of this long-legged idiot, you're crazy! Not after I got him out of jail."

Grimes caught Elma's shoulder. "Look here," he stuttered, "you can't talk thattaway, this lady's totally respectful, she's a banker's daughter."

That did not soothe Elma a bit. "Banker? Oh, you low down coyote, you fortune hunter, after all I've done for you!"

She smacked Anne. Grimes, trying to drag her from the buggy step, tore Elma's red dress to the waist, and Elma turned out a good display. A crowd of cowpunchers cheered.

Then Anne took a hand. Two hands, in fact: both full of brunette hair.

Elma's feet slipped. The buggy step was too narrow for footwork. That threw Grimes off balance. Anne could not let go in time, and Elma would not: the pair of lovelies landed between the buggy wheels, and on top of Grimes. "Grab that there hoss!" he yelled, "and git these gals offen me!"

He was submerged in a flurry of legs, skirts, tattered outer and under garments. But someone did grab the bridle, and the wheels did not mar either girl's curves.

Grimes dragged Anne clear. Elma came up clawing. Before he could shake her until her teeth rattled, Anne was driving away, with a Navajo rug about her shoulders to keep the breeze from her bare spots. Her chin was in the air. She did not say good-night.

"I barely get you loose from a judge's daughter," Elma stormed, "when you get tangled up with a banker's high nosed baggage!"

"Her *nose* ain't all that's high," Grimes retorted, and stalked away. Broken Axe had become complicated. He would have left on that very stage, but no woman was going to herd him around.

IN THE morning, he got a livery nag and rode out toward the

(Continued on page 93)

SIX-GUN

By LARRY DUNN

The girl held the gun in both hands. "I had to do it!" she moaned.

Barney couldn't believe his ears when the girl he had never met before asked him to marry her. But it put his dander up when he found her punchers backing her up

WEDDING

BLACK shapes of death flew low over the waterless benches of the Tepee mountains. Some of the buzzards were already feasting upon a few gaunted, starved-to-death bone racks that had fallen. Four thousand living cattle bawled in the mesquite along a creek that was only dry, stony rubble.

Seventeen days the herd had been on the trail from the Ricos. Drought had burned off Barney Comstock's range and sopped up all of his waterholes. So he had driven northward, getting some scanty feed and water, until his herd was here under the Tepees.

"The cows ain't restin' none," said old Matt Gordon, his ramrod. "They're millin'. If they got a smell o' dew, they'd bust hell loose. An' them buzzards on wings ain't all, Barney."

"I know," said Barney bitterly. "They's human vultures in the malapi up there, just waitin' to pounce when it comes on dark. Matt, we've gotta have feed an' some water or we're licked."

Seventeen trail-weary days behind him, Barney was thinking of the six hundred miles ahead to Abelard. It was the highest rail shipping point. Beef prices were high. These steers were from yearlings to three-year-olds, and they should have been prime.

Something close onto $75,000 was wrapped up in that herd.

"Bring up the sorrel, Matt," ordered Barney grimly. "I'm ridin' down to that hell's half acre they call a town. I'll see if they's any spare range or feed to be had. Likewise there is some water if the ranchers hereabouts ain't hoardin' it up."

Matt pulled at the horns of his mustache mournfully.

"How'd we be gittin' the same if they was any, without no cash dinero, Barney?"

"The word of a Comstock's as good as his bond on the Ricos, Matt."

"But we ain't nowise nigh the Ricos, Barney," g r u n t e d Matt. "An' they say more'n one trail herd's last been heered of here about Tepee Flats. Maybe so I'd best ride along, Barney?"

Barney Comstock swung a rangy body, almost as gaunted as any of his cows, into the hull. His blue eyes burned with fire through seventeen days' growth of reddish beard.

"You're needed to see that the boys hold the herd against any sudden idea of a stampede that might come from them vultures that's hidin' out, bidin' their time in the malapi, Matt."

It was late afternoon as Barney Comstock rolled his spurs and headed the sorrel for the blotch upon nature known as the town of Tepee Flats. Barney would have been interested if he had seen a scrawny, old cowpoke extricate himself from the mesquite.

The shriveled puncher seemed almost lost in his oversize chaps. He mumbled as he made his way to a horse tied out back of the mesquite ridge where he had hidden.

"So he's the pilgrim wearin' the monicker o' Comstock," he said through toothless gums. "An' he's needin' range an' water for them cows a'mighty bad. He looks like a right upstandin' an' peart young feller. Maybe so he'll fit in with the boss's ideas."

BARNEY COMSTOCK was wearing his one single-action Colts as he stepped into the dance hall saloon that had no name. It was the only gullet slaking spot in Tepee Flats. Barney had to step over mangy dogs surrounded by clouds of flies as he shoved through the batwings.

Too much silence, too much careless shifting of boots in the sawdust and too much of a wide yawn upon the cross-eyed bartender's greasy face informed Barney that he had been expected. He sensed that besides the human vultures eyeing his trail-exhausted herd out on the Tepee Mountain benches, there were plenty more buzzards in reserve here in Tepee Flats.

A broad-bellied h o m b r e who looked as if he was mostly hand-worked vest was at the end of the bar. His black eyes seemed like shoe buttons in rolls of fat. He wore a diamond on one hand. His gun butt was downright ornamen-

tal, sticking up out of a belt under a broad, red sash.

A slim, blonde dance-hall girl with long, nice legs and a surprising round of curves below her throat, considering her tall build, undulated over to Barney. Her teeth were nice and white, and her mouth was smiling. Right there her enticement struck a snag.

The hard lines around her mouth and eyes offset all the allure of her sweetly fashioned body.

"Buyin' me a drink, stranger?" she said to Barney.

Barney's reply was to spin his last silver dollar onto the bar. He turned his back to the girl.

"I'm havin' a shot of your rotgut, mister," he said to the cross-eyed bartender. "I'm drinkin' alone."

The smile left the girl's face. She caught his arm to turn him toward her.

"Strangers don't guzzle alone in Tepee Flats, stranger!" she said venomously. "My name's Lola. One for me, too, Charley."

She didn't have a chance to release Barney's arm. He snapped it back and Lola sat down hard in the sawdust. Her short skirt flew up to show the trivial lacy things around neatly rounded thighs.

Lola screamed out an imprecation. She scrambled up, snatching a short, pointed knife from her swelling blouse. Half a dozen of the watching hombres rubbed their fingers along their guns.

Barney stood motionless, except for his eyes. His right hand remained where it had been, touching the worn bone butt of his one weapon. It must have been the cool, bitter hell in the blue of his eyes that held everything.

The raging girl herself saw it. She hesitated. The broad-bellied man stepped from the end of the bar. His pudgy hand waved Lola away. His own hand was upon his ornamented gun butt. His beady, black eyes met Barney's.

"The drink's on me, Comstock," he said. "Lola told you that new pilgrims don't drink alone in Tepee Flats. And they state their business 'fore they drink at all. My name's Pritchard, an' I'm what law there is here."

THERE came that uneasy, whispering movement that always tells when smart hombres are shuffling out of the line of gunfire. Barney heard it. His gaze went over this Pritchard's stocky body from his polished boots to his slicked hair.

Without speaking, he turned, poured his drink of redeye, and downed it with one gulp.

"I'm takin' the change out'n that dollar, if any, mister," he said to the cross-eyed bartender, his long back squarely toward the man who had called him by name, and introduced himself as Pritchard.

Having downed a drink alone, he turned again, slowly.

"So, you're Pritchard," he said flatly. "An' you know I'm Barney Comstock, 'cause you make it a business to know what herds come up the trail. A'right, I'll tell you my business."

All eyes were upon Pritchard. Twice his pudgy hand had started to bring out that ornamental gun, but it hadn't. He looked into Barney's hard eyes and something

there caused him to overlook the deliberate affront of this gaunt, rangy cattleman drinking alone, as he had said he would.

"Nev' mind how I know your name, Comstock," said Pritchard softly. "You don't have to tell me your business either. You're lookin' for feed, an' waterin' holes for four thousan' dogies. If you had the price to pay, there ain't any roundabout Tepee Flats."

Barney's fingers itched. But he replied coolly.

"I reckoned that would be the answer, Pritchard," he said. "I s'pose you'd make an offer for the herd on the hoof?"

"Yeh," said Pritchard. "To make it legal an' bindin', I'll give you a dollar for the lot."

Barney stiffened his hand to keep his fingers from curling around the shooting iron.

"I 'lowed that was the way it would be, Pritchard," he said tonelessly. "I don't want to see 'em die, but I'll drive them steers to hell an' gone 'fore I deal myself out."

BOOTS shuffled, chaps rustled, breathing rasped as Barney turned and slapped the batwing doors going out. He had heard of Lon Pritchard, and the Tepee Flats trap. But he had also heard that nearby were numerous grama grass ranges, with spring waterholes back of the benches.

"Sure as hell, some hard-pushed rancher'll be willin' to make a deal, if I can find such," he muttered.

It was coming on slow dark. Two waiting riders loomed out of alkali clouds as Barney pushed his sorrel out of the limits of Tepee Flats. Barney's old gun came halfway from its holster. Then he saw that both riders were age-bent, gray-mustached punchers.

One spoke, toothlessly, with a mumbling that was friendly.

"Name's Comstock, ain't it, stranger?" he said.

Barney dropped his iron back into leather.

"Seems the monicker o' Comstock's right well spread about this blisterin' hell-hole," he said. "So my name is Comstock. I'd be pleased to know if bearin' the same is held against me?"

One old puncher cackled, and he said, "He's got speerit, Pete. So he mightn't see eye to eye with the boss."

"Shet up, yuh ol' rooster!" said the toothless Pete. "I reckon, Mister Comstock, if you'll ride along with us, we'll be able an' willin' to offer you a dicker for feedin' an' waterin' your cows on the best range 'twixt the Ricos an' Abelard."

Barney mused upon this quickly. Had these oldtimers been planted out here by Pritchard? It might be a trick to delay him in getting the herd moving?

But he thought, the steers can't last another twenty miles without feed or water. What have I got to lose?

"Your palaver has its points, oldtimer," he said to Pete. "But you an' your saddle pard ride along in front, so's I'll be knowin' when we come to the dry gulchin' trap that's maybe laid out."

Old Pete chuckled, and he said, "My pard's 'Chuck' Dever, an' I'm Pete Wharton. If you're reas'nable, we'll help you save them bawlin' dogies. 'Tain't more'n a couple

He snapped his arm back and Lola sat down hard.

o' jumps an' a spit to the Y-R, an' you'll be right welcome, Comstock."

BLUE dusk lay over the Tepees. Barney Comstock's mouth almost watered as he looked across long, rising swells of ungrazed, thick grama grass. It was so tall it was beginning to seed.

Long green swales indicated the location of abundant waterholes. Old Pete and Chuck guided him through a sagging main gate that led into the spread they had called the Y-R. He had asked the name of their boss.

The only reply he had received was, "We ain't no right to be namin' names until we see what you'll be thinkin' o' the prospects."

Well, the prospect of fattening feed and plenty of water for four thousand head of young cattle was beyond any of Barney's wildest dreams. Something odd about the Y-R, with all of that rich range and water, struck him.

The fences were rusty and wires broken. The buildings were warped and tumbledown, as if they had been neglected a long time. High grass grew right up to the front porch of the ranch-house.

All of the questions bubbling in Barney's brain suddenly were forgotten. A girl was standing on the old front porch, watching the punchers and Barney ride up.

Curling, blue black hair blew around as pretty a face as Barney had ever seen. The girl was tanned, but her skin was as smooth as ivory, and her rounded chin was uplifted proudly to reveal the sweet column of her throat.

Small, but firm young breasts, were prominent against a snow-white, cotton waist. The steady breeze whipped a thin, white skirt tight against contours such as Barney never before had seen.

"We'll shag up," stated Pete, dismounting.

Below the level of the porch, Barney's mind may have been upon four thousand thirsty, hungry cows, but his eyes followed from small, neat ankles up the tightly drawn stockings to where the kindly wind lifted the edge of the girl's skirt above him.

She must have seen the direction of his eyes, for she glanced down and quickly put her skirt back in place over her knees. Old Pete went up ahead and spoke a few words that Barney failed to hear.

Old Pete motioned for Barney and Chuck to come on up. Just then a slack-jawed young man, with little eyes and a dissipated, white face, came around the corner of the house. Barney could see he had something on his mind.

The young man started toward him and the others on the porch. Then around the house came another cowpuncher in chaps, and he was as old as Pete and Chuck. He held a .45 in his hand.

"Damn yuh, Tinker!" he rasped. "Yuh ain't interferin' none with Sally's business! Yuh git ridin' 'thout openin' your trap, or I'll ventilate yuh this time sure as hell!"

The dissipated young man glanced fearfully over his shoulder. He hurried down across to the corral. Barney looked up at the sweet face of the girl. The situation was so queer it made him shiver a little. Her wide brown eyes were

studying him intently, and she hadn't spoken to him yet.

Barney wished to all hell he had shaved or something. He became conscious of his sweat-stained shirt he hadn't changed in seventeen days of dusty trail. He cleared his throat.

"Howdy, ma'am," he ventured. "I wasn't expectin' to meet with any women folks, or I'd maybe slicked up a bit. I—"

IF THIS was the girl called Sally, her smile was the nicest and at the same time the saddest Barney had ever seen.

"That's all right, Mr. Comstock," she said quietly. "You ain't of the Tennessee Comstocks, are you?"

"No'm," said Barney, wonderingly. "My folks come from back in Virginia to Texas fifty years ago."

He heard the slack-jawed young man called Tinker starting a horse on a run out of the corral. He forgot that at the girl's next question.

"You don't happen to be married, do you, Mr. Comstock?"

"No'm," he said, more puzzled than ever. "Ain't had no time or inclination to get hitched. Been buildin' me a herd an' figurin' on the future a mite. Why'd you ask, ma'am, seein' I'm only lookin' for grazin' to save my herd? I ain't any cash money, but my note's good. I would leave some cows to bind it."

The girl glanced toward the ranch-house door. Barney heard a drunken voice singing a maudlin song.

"Mr. Comstock," said the girl quietly, "will you marry me?"

Barney Comstock had never before seen any woman critter with all of her needful points so nicely fashioned to lead on any red-blooded he man. He gulped, shaking his head. He was not sure he had heard her just right.

"I thought you said—I thought you asked me to marry you, ma'am? Maybe I'm some mixed up in my hearin'?"

"I did ask you to marry me, Mr. Comstock," repeated the girl. "Will you?"

"Why—er—you ain't known me long, ma'am. I might turn out to be some plumb pizen hombre, an' you wouldn't want—"

Barney was as dizzy as if he had just taken a header from a sunfishing bronc.

"I'll be the judge of that, Mr. Comstock." The girl was calm. "Will you marry me this evening, at once?"

Barney suddenly became aware that old Pete and old Chuck dangled well-worn six-guns in their hands. The ancient coots looked as if they didn't have any more brains than to use them. Barney didn't hear the other puncher. A hard point pressed into his back.

"Miss Sally has done you the honor to ask you to git hitched with 'er, so we'll proceed with the ceremony," said old Pete.

The third puncher pressed his gun hard into Barney's back. He removed Barney's single piece of hardware.

"Yuh won't lose nothin', mister, by marryin' Sally," his captor said. "By gravy, we ain't time for dallyin'! Walk on up them steps!"

The girl spoke then, quickly.

"Mr. Comstock, I haven't ex-

plained enough, I guess. If you'll marry me, I'll never hold you to it. I've already sent one of my riders with word from you to head your herd out to my range. You can fatten your herd, and your riders will get their grub. When you are ready, you will drive on to market, and it won't cost you a cent."

Barney had an idea he must have breathed a lot of dust off loco weed. As he came closer to the girl, he couldn't see but what he'd have been right proud to have married her like at any time. But he had a stubbornness, and something about this was all hell, west and crooked.

He sensed some kind of a trap. But, looking into the girl's big, brown eyes, and seeing her sad little smile, he couldn't make any thought stick of her running a crooked ranny.

He suddenly whirled away from the six-gun in his back. Hell! He could handle three oldtimers like these, and then he'd find out what this was all about?

Barney made a slight mistake. The old coot behind him was smarter and quicker than he thought. He heard the girl cry out. Metal smacked the back of his head. His instinctive reach to prevent himself from falling threw both his arms around the girl.

BARNEY failed to recall anything clearly for some little time. Then he was standing, propped up by old Pete and old Chuck. A tall man in a frock coat was swaying drunkenly on his feet and reading out of a book.

Barney was conscious of hearing him say, "Do you, Sally Comstock —er—Sally do you take—this man, I mean Barney Comstock to be your lawfully wedded—"

Barney lost a bit of it, but he heard the girl's voice say, "I do," very clearly.

Barney's aching brain was whirling. He seemed to be looking on rather than being a part of this locoed wedding. And, that tall hombre with the book, must be a drunk parson or a justice or something.

But wait? A thought clicked. Damned if he hadn't called the girl Sally Comstock? That was crazy. Even if she was hitching up with him, against his rightful will, her name wouldn't be Comstock until after it as all over.

Barney muttered, "Hold up there, parson—I ain't willin'—I won't—"

A chill went all over him. The girl's soft, warm hand was squeezing his fingers tightly. As haywire as it might be, Barney had never before held a hand like that.

Old Pete said, "Comstock, willin' or agin' it, the ceremony is 'most done. When Jedge Sharpe asks yuh, yuh say, 'I do.' An' there won't be nothin' bindin' or holdin' you. You git all the range feed an' water, an' yuh hit the trail ag'in soon as you're ready."

The tall, weaving Judge Sharpe looked at Barney. He said thickly, "Barney Comstock, do you take this woman, Sally Comstock, to be your lawfully wedded wife and—"

The book fell out of Judge Sharpe's hands. Old Chuck sprang behind him, supporting him. Old Pete nudged Barney.

"Say, 'I do,' Comstock—say it pronto!"

Barney clicked his teeth together stubbornly. He'd be damned

The drunken man was saying, "Do you, Sally, take this man. . . ?"

if he'd be hornswoggled into something—

From the impact of it, it might have been a sock filled with buckshot. Barney went down into a black void. He did not hear the drunken Judge Sharpe say, "I now pronounce you—"

BARNEY COMSTOCK pulled his aching body from a strange bunk. A raucous snore assailed his ears. Old Pete Wharton was asleep in a chair, his .45 on his bony knees. Moonlight filtered through the bunk-house window. Barney didn't see old Chuck, or the third puncher who had "stood him up" at his wedding.

For a minute, his aching brain told him he was having a new kind of hangover. He got to the window. Many cattle moved like dark blots in the swelling pasture above the ranch buildings. He could tell well-fed contentment in occasional bawling.

Riders showed among the cows. His own hands, he judged. The old ranch-house sprawled comfortably under the bright moon. Everything came back to him as he felt a knob back of his ears.

"Hitched up!" he grated. "Roped an' hogtied against my will! An—"

Another thought hit him. This was where his anger started to rise.

"An' sleepin' in the bunkhouse!" he finished.

Thereafter, Barney worked fast. Before he let out a squawk, old Pete was tied up and gagged in one of the bunks. Barney had his gun. He found a razor and soap. Minutes later, his clean, grim face showed in a cracked mirror, decorated with a few cuts.

He found a clean shirt that almost fitted him. He was buttoning the shirt when the door pushed open. Barney whipped the gun into his hands. Matt Gordon stood there, half grinning.

"Come alive, huh?" said Matt, his ramrod. "Now what d'you want us to do? The cows are fed up, an' watered. Heard about your dang fool hitchin' yourself up to save the herd, an' gittin' pie-eyed an' fallin' down. Reckon now, you've come to yourself, we'll be ridin' on."

It hadn't been a dream then. Barney's mouth went tight.

"Get back to herd, we're stayin', Matt!" he ordered.

Matt Gordon said, "You know what, Barney? That Lon Pritchard is liable to come ridin' out with his hellers. Did you stop to think, if you get yourself lead pizened, your pretty little widow will have bargained herself into $70,000 worth o' cows?"

"Bigod!" snapped Barney. "So that's the ranny! You get out, an' keep our boys watchin'! Dangnation! These old punchers here are sure 'nough standin' in with Pritchard! I wouldn't have thought it of that gal, with her heart touchin' smile, as if she was bein' forced to do somethin' that went against the grain!"

"Where you goin', Barney?" worried Matt Gordon.

"Where does any hombre head for on his weddin' night?" exploded Barney.

BARNEY removed old Chuck Dever just inside the ranchhouse door by clipping a fist into his whiskered chin. A low light burned from a room back along a wide hallway.

An oil lamp was turned down low on a table. Barney closed the door behind him and pulled in the latch string. His mouth wore a hard grin. He was mad from his toes to his tousled hair.

Suddenly the anger fled from him. The dim light showed the girl's face. One white, bare arm was across her shadowed bosom. Dark smudges on her cheeks might have been traces of tears. Her mouth was innocent, sweet, and her lips seemed as fresh as dew.

"Mrs. Barney Comstock," said Barney under his breath. "Now ain't this one hell of a mess. You an' that Pritchard buzzard. I wouldn't have believed it. Well. by all hell—!"

One hard arm slipped under the rounded neck. His grim, angry mouth was upon the soft, moist lips. She tried to cry out, attempted to struggle free. Barney held her, strangling a scream with his kiss, conscious that the girl was clad only in a thin, white nightgown as the covers slid from the bed.

The girl's hands beat at his face. Her brown eyes were open, and he saw terror in them. Barney held her inexorably to him, keenly

aware of her warm, tempting softness, as she fought him.

"Don't, oh, don't!" She had quit trying to scream. Her plea was a husky whisper. "Please! Who are you? How did you come in here?"

Barney suddenly remembered that the removal of his red beard had changed his face. He had the girl's arms at her side. The small, firm breasts were pressed to his shirt. The nightgown was as nothing at all over her slender, shapely legs.

"I'm your husband, Mrs. Comstock," he said grimly. "You remember hitchin' up with me? Or maybe I ain't the first hombre with a herd that's happened along, for you an' Pritchard—"

"Mr. Comstock, don't say that!"

She quit struggling abruptly. There was mixed anger and something of fear in her voice. She added, "Please let me go. You don't understand—you aren't—"

Barney Comstock stopped all that with his mouth upon her red lips. He was scarcely conscious himself when that kiss was being returned, when he had freed her hands and she was clinging to him.

All of the warmth of her body was close to him now, and he was cold all over in spite of it. The girl quit trying to talk. She was trembling, half sobbing, half laughing. Then she was in his arms in complete surrender. For minutes Barney forgot all of his vengeful purpose in having come here—

RIDERS pounded up outside in the moonlight. Barney got to the bedroom window as the red slashes of guns started down near the bunkhouse. He heard the yipping yells of his own riders up with the herd, and the explosions of their irons.

Barney whirled. The girl was standing in the middle of the room. Her white nightgown was torn some about the lacy throat piece, and the white pureness of the mounded breasts brought an indefinable ache into Barney's heart.

Her small feet were bare. The slim ankles curved into delightful legs, with smooth knees and inches of rounded thighs that he could see. All of that only made the rage well chokingly into his throat.

"Damn yuh!" he snarled. "If you'd been four-square, I'd have loved you the minute I laid eyes on you! The way it is, I'd rather have hitched up with a dance hall gal, one I slapped down in Tepee Flats!"

A rifle whanged outside. Lead splintered the window and a sliver of glass stung Barney's cheek. He had overlooked standing there with the turned-down oil lamp behind him. With one jump, he got back and started to smack the lamp from the table.

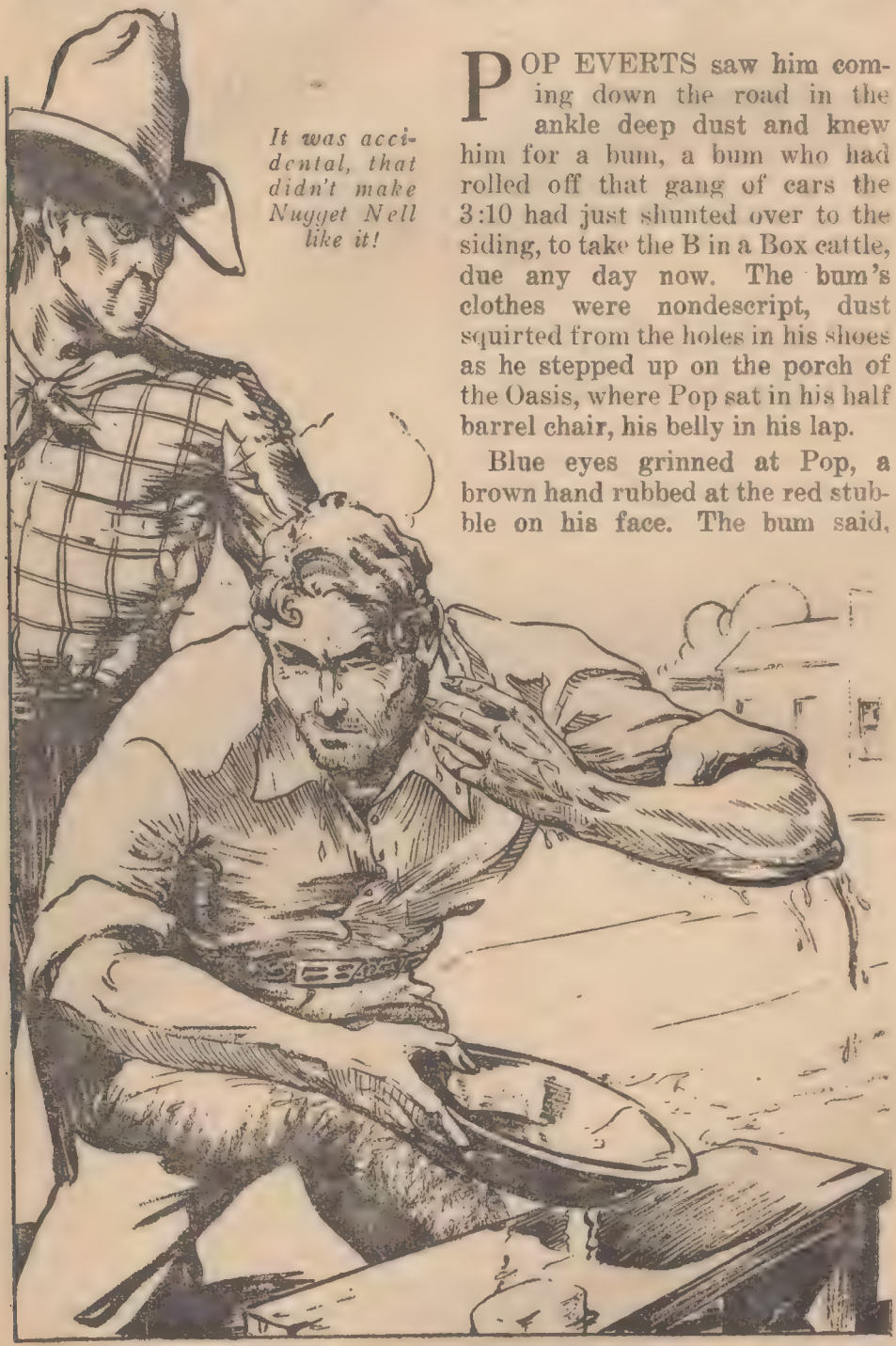
He was too late. Covered by the thundering of the guns outside, two men had made it into the ranchhouse. The latch of the bedroom door snapped under a shoulder weight.

Barney grabbed for the gun he had taken from old Pete. The door slammed open. The broad-bellied Lon Pritchard filled the space, two highly ornamented irons in his hands.

Over Pritchard's shoulder, Barney saw the slack-jawed face of

(Continued on page 98)

LYNCH BEE



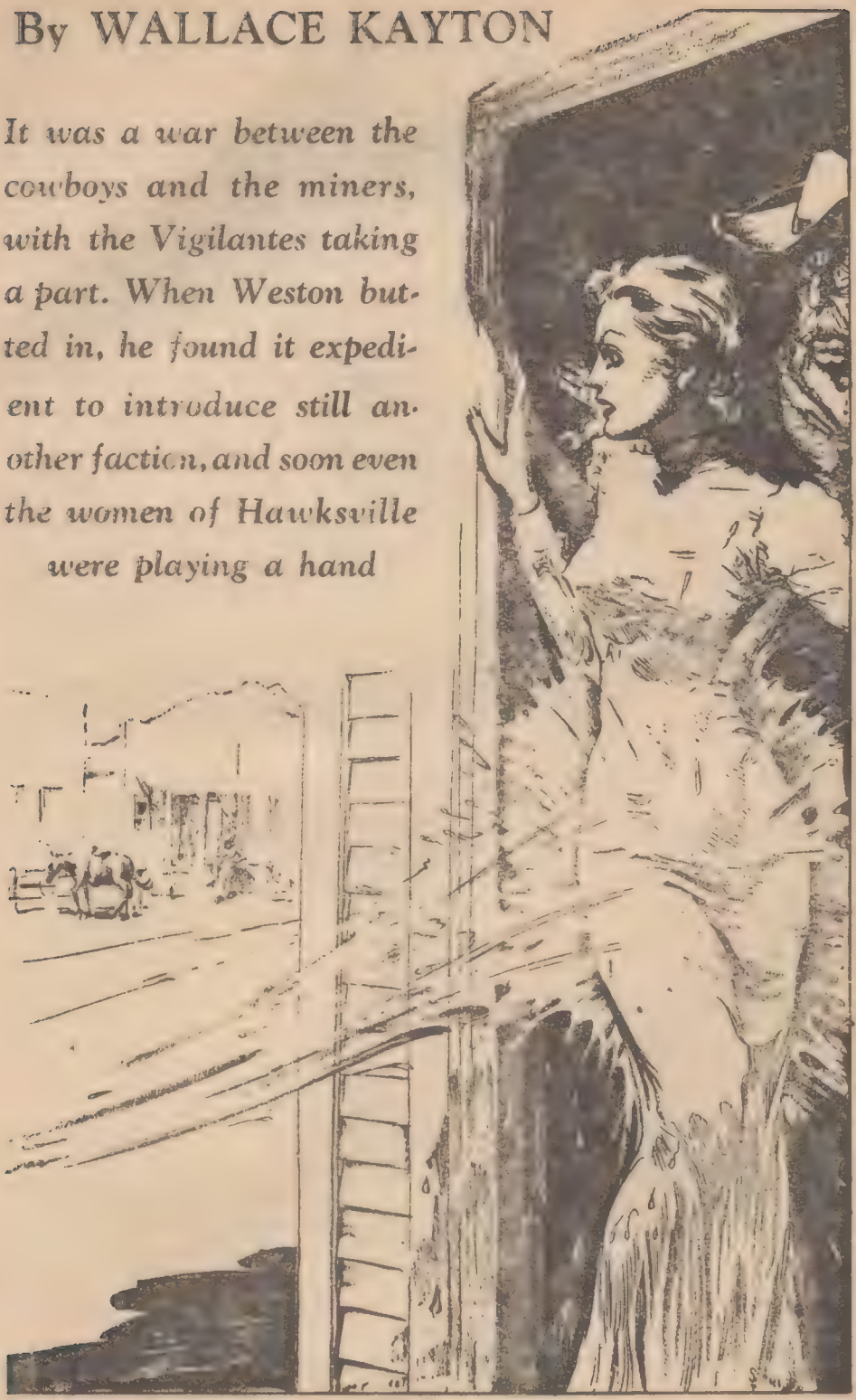
It was accidental, that didn't make Nugget Nell like it!

POP EVERTS saw him coming down the road in the ankle deep dust and knew him for a bum, a bum who had rolled off that gang of cars the 3:10 had just shunted over to the siding, to take the B in a Box cattle, due any day now. The bum's clothes were nondescript, dust squirted from the holes in his shoes as he stepped up on the porch of the Oasis, where Pop sat in his half barrel chair, his belly in his lap.

Blue eyes grinned at Pop, a brown hand rubbed at the red stubble on his face. The bum said,

By WALLACE KAYTON

It was a war between the cowboys and the miners, with the Vigilantes taking a part. When Weston butted in, he found it expedient to introduce still another faction, and soon even the women of Hawksville were playing a hand



"Howya, Pop, you got a place a man can wash?"

Pop thumbed toward the side of the Oasis. He said, "You can wash. But we got a swamper, and we don't want no bums in this town. Hawksville is tough."

The bum just kept grinning, shifted his newspaper package, and went around to the side of the Oasis. Pop heard the noise of his ablutions, heard him sputter and blow. And all at once he heard a bunch of cusswords that could have come from only one source—Nugget Nell. He hoisted himself out of the chair, waddled to the corner of the porch and peered about the building. The windows were full of cowboys and miners, their heads out thrust to watch the play.

It was easy to see what had happened. Nugget Nell always used the side door. Just as the bum had got through washing, he'd picked up the washbasin to toss the dirty water aside. And Nugget Nell had chosen that moment to step out of the Oasis.

Sure, the bum was flustered. Try throwing a pan of dirty water on a swell looker like Nell, and see how you feel.

Nell was as tall as most men, and built in proportion, she was. None of that low necked short skirt stuff for her! Nell was smart. Her skirts came clear to her ankles, her waist high about her throat, covering her lush breasts completely—not like the other girls—but she gave the impression, always, that that there dress was her only garment.

So there she stood, cussing, her red dress black in spots where the water had hit her. And there was the poor bum trying to dry her off with a towel, drying a lot of spots a man had no business drying. Out of the door pops Flush Donaldson, that likes to call Nugget Nell his girl. Flush was big, he weighed well over two hundred and he had the height and width to go with it. Few men, cowboy or miner, cared to go against him when he was angry.

He roared, "Get your hands off her, you little blinkety blank!"

THE bum looked surprised. So Flush made a mistake. He kicked him. And when the bum got up, Flush, still cussing, kicked at him again. Only he wasn't there this time. He grabbed Flush's shoeheel, and upended him. And he looked up at the windows and he said, "Some of you gentlemen better come get this ranny." He said it mild like, and his blue eyes seemed full of appeal. By then Flush was up. Flush dropped into his crouch and moved toward the bum. He swung his left. The little bum moved his head, the fist went over his shoulder. The little bum turned his back, grabbed the arm, and heaved.

Without waiting to see what happened to Flush, the bum turned back to Nell. Now she was looking at him with parted lips and shining eyes. You didn't get to see Flush tossed around like that every day in the year! The bum said, "Lady, all I can say is that I beg your pardon. I'd be proud to buy you a drink to make up for it, but I can't do no more!"

And to Pop's surprise, as well as the surprise of everybody else,

Nell took his arm like he was the Prince of Wales, and a minute later the two of them were drinking in a booth inside the Oasis! Nugget Nell all smiles and all coyness, and the bewhiskered bum talking as polite as a college professor. Pop Everts eased his bulk into the next booth and leaned back against the wall so he could hear better.

The bum said, "Beautiful one, as I hoofed my way into town I see quite an oak tree growing north of the village. Could you explain?"

"That," said Nell sweetly, "is the vigilante tree. Honey, you'd look right nice with a haircut."

"I noted, beautiful little dove," said this guy, and Pop's stomach turned, "there was a hangman's noose over a low limb, and a big sign burned in a board reading 3-7-77."

"A shave wouldn't hurt you any either," said Nell fondly. "3-7-77, honey, is the signature of the Vigilante Committee, that we have here in Hawksville. It's supposed to be a warning to all undesirable citizens, you know, to make them watch their steps. Haven't you got a clean shirt in that package?"

He didn't pay a bit of attention. He only said, "Tch! tch! Vigilantes. What seems to be the trouble, that a regular lawman can't take care of?"

"With a clean shirt and a shave and haircut and—what's that? Oh, not much trouble. You see, the cowboys claim riffraff works in the mines, claim it's miners that bring in the crooked gamblers and skin games to take the cowboy's wages. And on the other hand, the mine payroll gets knocked off every once in a while and the miners claim it's the cowboys that do it. They hate each other. Sort of a Mexican standoff."

"But why the Vigilantes?"

She shrugged her shapely shoulders. "They're to see fair play. If a miner hides behind a tree and shoots a cowboy without giving him a chance, of if a cowboy gets full of too much redeye and ropes an unarmed miner and drags him, that ain't sportsmanship, see? So as a usual thing the Vigilante committee calls that night, and the tree gets a new customer. Here honey, take this for a couple of days."

He looked down to where her fingers poked at his knee. Her skirt was high up in her lap, so high that the jeweled garter was apparent, that and an unselfish circle of velvet white skin. A flat fold of bills was beneath that garter, matching those she was extending toward him in her fingers.

He said, "Really, I couldn't, you know. Why should you?"

She grinned. "Baby, for three years I been waiting to see Flush Donaldson tossed around. You can pay me back when you get on your feet. I'd admire seeing you in decent clothes. You'd look right nice!" She patted his cheek.

HE TOOK the folded bills, grinning. Just then the door opened and in swaggered Jim Palmer and Hawk Ralston. The bum said, "Gee-whiz! All my life I been reading about badmen with tied down holsters and all. I'll bet you that man has plenty of notches on his gun!"

Nell laughed. "The little guy with the goat beard is James Palmer that publishes our paper, the

Hawksville Nugget. The big guy is Howdy Henry. He may be bad, he says he is. As far as notches is concerned, I don't know. He's head guard at the Argus mine, and some say he's mighty sweet on old man Tolliver's daughter, Marge. Tolliver owns the mine. And honey," she wrinkled her nose, "maybe you better get a bath at the Elite!"

Going out, Ralston of the B in a Box almost ran over him. He glared at the little bum, who nodded brightly and stepped aside. Pop Everts tensed. There was bad blood and a lot of it, between Ralston of the ranchers and Henry of the miners. Plenty bad blood! But Ralston bellied the bar, and Dutchie served his drink, and though both men glared at each other in the mirror, nothing was said.

Afterward Pop said you wouldn't have believed it. Horses pranced and danged near run away, men hurried back into saloons for quick ones. There was a rumor that the town drunk swore off drinking. Pop was in his chair again when he saw him, that red headed bum. Evidently Nugget Nell had slipped him plenty for he was dressed fitten to kill! Guggenheim, the general store feller, had even sold him his derby, the one he used to wear himself till the boys began taking shots at it. He had on a red flowered vest, and a high wing collar, and pretty yellow shoes, and striped britches. His coat had two long tails, too. I tell you, that bum was just an accident looking for a place to happen.

Right through town came the Tolliver buckboard with its team of spanking greys. Marge always tied up in front of Pop's place. So she whirled in, brought them to a stop, raised an arm and called, "Hiya, everybody, tie me up will you, boys?"

So Ralston and Henry leaped off the porch and down the steps and made for the buckboard. There stood Marge, with one of them cradling silk sweaters, and a short linen skirt, the wind whipping it back against her until every line of her pretty legs was visible.

Ralston butted Henry. Henry glared at Ralston. They squared off. And Ralston smacked Henry in the chest. Henry went backward with Ralston after him. And what do you think happened? Right. The bum stepped up, he said, "May I assist you, ma'am?" He held out his hand. Marge beamed at him. laid her fingers in his, hoisted up the skirt for clearance, so that a feller got a glimpse, maybe just a hint, of white, and jumped. Her skirt ballooned out, it was right enjoyable.

They was halfway up the street to Gunnenheim's Emporium before Ralston and Howdy Henry realized the bird had flown, so to speak. They stood there together. glaring at the little bum on his return. But it was Palmer, the editor, who laughed and said, "Right out from under your noses, men!" And Palmer stepped forward and thrust out a hand, saying, "Welcome to our midst, Young Lochinvar! Palmer is my name. On the strength of those accoutrements. I'll stand a drink."

"Weston is my name," said the done over bum, "and on the strength of these accoutrements, I'll take that drink!"

WHILE they were inside, who comes along for his sundown snort, but King Tillot himself, and Thompsen Barnes, the banker. Tillot was a big redfaced fellow, who'd developed the Argus from a hole in the ground to one of the biggest gold mines in this section. Barnes was considerable man himself, maybe forty years old, looking more like a rancher or rider

"You dirty devils! Hiding behind masks!" he raged.

than a feller who spent most of his time at a desk.

The man who called himself Weston looked over his glass and saw Nell. She motioned, and Weston excused himself.

Nell pulled him into a booth, beaming at him. "Why'nt you tell me you had money, you shrimp? You couldn't have bought that outfit with what I gave you!" He patted her knee and beamed soulfully, so she shrugged it off. "You get out of line of fire, hear. Going to be some trouble there in a few minutes. You stay out of it."

Flush Donaldson passed them, glowered at Weston, started to pause and thought better of it. Pop Everts lumbered behind the bar and lifted a sawed off shotgun and laid it on top of it. Now, at the bar there was Howdy Henry, next his boss, King Tillot, and there was James Palmer, editor of the paper, and there was Thompsen Barnes, the banker. All town people, you might say.

The batwings flew wide—and there stood Hawk Ralston, shoulder to shoulder with grizzled Mike Brennan, and backed by all the rest of the B in a Box boys that worked for Mike. They came in, slow, everybody of one group eyeing the other group like tomcats, hands hovering. And they bellied the bar right close to the town group, and slapped the bar, so that Pop Everts and his bartender hurried to push out glasses and bottles. After they'd drunk, Mike Brennan turned to King Tillot.

He glared from beneath his brows, and he said, "This is payday, in more ways than one!"

"How do you mean?" Tillot wasn't scared of man or beast.

Over in the booth Nugget Nell grabbed Weston and kept him down easy.

"I mean last payday one of my boys was hanged on your tree, Tillot. I mean your Vigilantes did that, because he killed a miner after the miner had tried for him in open fight! Nothing like that going to happen tonight."

Tillot said, "I'm as sorry of that as you are. Your man was drunk. He was tossed in jail to sober up. I had no idea a mob would lynch him."

"Lynch him! Mob! You got an outfit that calls itself Vigilantes. You hung Gowdy and pinned the sign on him 3-7-77. All you guys belong to them, my men ain't safe in town. This here is a showdown!"

Tillot glared, his face got redder and redder. Barnes, the banker, said, "Easy, Tillot. And you, Brennan. This is a mixup. Tillot doesn't belong to the Vigilance Committee, do you, King?"

Tillot shook his head in denial.

Brennan sneered, "I asked fifty men here in town, and all of them denied belonging! That's nuts. How do you account for that?"

Barnes said slowly, "It's easy to account for. This Vigilance committee, is really a bunch of outlaws. They operate under masks, that's all. They may even be cowboys!"

The argument waxed and waned. Over in the booth Weston said to Nell, "I figure only one thing—I'd hate to be a member of the Vigilance Committee if one of these fellows catch them! He'd sure go up in smoke. Tell me what's gone on?"

"I told you, honey. The cowmen blame the mining men and the mining men blame the cowmen. The Vigilance Committee rides and keeps riding. Sometimes they avenge what they call wrongs, sometimes they just use devilment, that's all."

Howdy Henry had the floor now, and his hand was on his gun butt. He glared around, and he said, "I work for Mr. Tillot at the mine. We all been denying having anything to do with the Vigilantes, that bunch of night-riding devils that tears up town and countryside alike. Now I'm tired of being called a liar. Does anyone want to make anything of it?"

Weston snickered. But Hawk Ralston, the Bar in a Box *segundo* didn't snicker. His face went black. But Brennan stepped in between them. His grizzled mouth said, "All right, Tillot, I'll believe you once more. Just don't let anything happen to my men tonight, or any other night. Drink up, they're on me."

IT WAS seven o'clock before Weston could get away. He met her in the cottonwood grove, where she said she'd be. And she almost died laughing at his clothes. Tenderly she clasped him to her, pressed her soft body against his, whispered, "Jim Weston, you ought to go on the stage, that's all there is to it! You're a born comedian!" She kissed him again. It was Marge Tillot. "Now what have you found out, darling?"

"Nothing so far," he admitted. "I came in as a bum, then I let that woman Nell buy this outfit. If I can make them think I'm a harmless nut, I'll have more chance. Now I got your letter last week, what's happened?"

"A lot! Dad is plenty discouraged. You know he promised mother when she died that he'd never be responsible for the shedding of more blood. But the cowboys come in looking for trouble, and well, whoever this 3-7-77 committee is, they seem to be willing to make the trouble all right!"

She talked swiftly there in the gathering shadows. She gave him exact victims, dates, occurrences, when men had been left hanging to that oak with the gruesome warning on their chest. Some, most of them, had merely been accused of something trivial. But—and this appealed to her—quite a few of them were known to have been carrying large sums of money before the Vigilantes caught up with them.

Weston, range detective, said, "Honey, it's easy to see what's the trouble. Any masked organization is dangerous. I checked the newspapers at the state capitol, and there doesn't seem to have been a terrible lot of money stolen. It looks to me like this pseudo-vigilante bunch is trying—and succeeding, in setting one bunch off against the others, the miners against the ranchmen, and vice versa. Something big is bound to happen!"

After a while, after kissing her, he turned to leave her. And neither, so close was their embrace, noticed the man who sulked in the stall twice removed from them, hidden by the shadows.

WESTON, range detective sent for by Marge Tillot, was right. It happened that night. First the watchman at the mine came staggering down the hill with blood pouring into his face and a placard around his neck bearing the dread numbers, "3-7-77," the mark of the Vigilantes. He managed to gasp out something concerning a pair of masked men who had knifed him and robbed the safe of the morrow's payroll. He died on Pop Evert's floor, his life blood staining the sawdust. Tillot was there. Tillot looked at Brennan of the B in a Box.

"Damn you," he snarled, "does that sound like I'm a Vigilante? Would I kill my own man? Suppose you count noses on your own cowmen and see where you come out!"

The fact remained, however, that any one of a hundred men could have done the deed, for on Saturday night, coming and going was not to be wondered at. Cowboy and miner alike wandered from spot to spot.

Early morning, however, found Brennan and his cowmen back in town, grey-faced, eyes red-rimmed. They sent for Tillot and met him and Howdy Henry at the bar again. Brennan said, "This here town ain't never had no law, mister. But it's time we had some. We been depending on the county seat and it's too far. Your night-watchman was killed last night and a sign left around his neck. We got home early this morning to find old Tom, our cook, and the only man that stayed at the ranch, dead as hell. With the same sort of sign around his neck. I had about four thousand dollars in my safe. It's gone."

Tillot said, "What do you mean to do, accuse somebody here in town of it?"

Brennan tossed out a gaudy silk handkerchief, brilliant orange on color. "This was on the floor. I aim to take the law into my own hands and find out whose it was. You want to help, or because you're a townsman, you going to sit back and take it easy?"

Tillot looked like an old man. He said, "I'm about to sell out my mine and get out of this, Brennan. I promised my wife never to have nothing to do with bloodshed again. You're damned tooting, I'm with you. I'd like to break this up as well as you would!"

At the Tillot house, Weston said to Marge, "That's the only way I know to do it, honey. And like you say, it's fairly dangerous. Think you can play your part?"

She thought she could—and she kissed him thoroughly.

NUGGET NELL, in her own boudoir, looked at the man she had befriended with admiration. "You didn't fool me for a minute, honey! I knew you wasn't no bum!"

Weston gathered up his papers and tossed them to her, grinning. "You're pretty smart, baby. Now put these away and keep them for me, d'you hear? They might prove embarrassing. You willing to do what I ask you to do?"

She was wearing the sheerest of black negligees, through which her skin gleamed like white satin. She got up, snuffed out her cigarette,

walked slowly toward him, one long leg at a time emering from the folds of the garment. She put her arm about his shoulders, whispered, "Little Nell always gets in too late! Sure, I'll do what you ask. But I wish I'd have beaten that Tillot babe to you."

He grinned, and grinning, kissed her . . . . . .

The door opened. Flush Donaldson, red faced, said, "Pardon me. I thought you were just leaving."

Weston took his arms away slowly, provocatively. "Bye, honey," he said, and went out the door.

Imperturbably she shot him through his belt buckle.

WESTON was drunk. Not obnoxiously drunk, but his liquor was apparent. Sometimes he had trouble laying his bet. Nugget Nell owned the gambling privileges in Pop Evert's joint, she was dealing blackjack with the dude. Long ago, when it got so steep, the others dropped out. Weston laid a bet of eight hundred on the board. He hit 21. Nell hit an even 20. For the last hour it was like that, until now the stack of chips before him totaled well over ten thousand dollars.

Nell grinned wryly, "Why'n't you quit, Weston?"

"I'm a best blackjack player in these here parts," crowed the drunk, glaring around. "All right, I quit. Cash me in!"

He grinned blearily about the circle. Tillot, Brennan, and Ralston from the B in a Box, Flush Donaldson, Howdy Henry, Palmer, the editor, all were there grinning back at him. At one time or another all of them had been taken over the hump by Nugget Nell. This was the fortune of the game.

Gravely he stuck his winnings into his pocket, walked around the table and swung Nell off her stool in a flurry of silken legs. "Come on, everybody," he yelled, and led the way to the bar, where he sat Nell.

Liquor was served. Weston swayed back and forth, glass in hand. "Me," he said gravely, "best damn' blackjack player in the world, and the best Pinkerton!"

He drank—almost alone. Every eye in the room was on him. It seemed to sober him. "Damn my eyes," he giggled, "I done it now, didn't I? Me, a Pinkerton, supposed to be working under cover, and I get drunk and give it away!"

The crowd roared with good-natured laughter, and in the midst of it, Weston took another drink. Finally he said, wryly, "Gents, I'll get fired for this. I might as well go out in a blaze of glory! Me, Jim Weston, I'm going to kiss every woman in Hawksville, starting here and now!"

And kiss Nugget Nell he did! Thoroughly and completely. And afterward, he staggered out, reeling and roaring, into the street, the laughter of the crowd behind him.

IT WAS nearly an hour later that she came reeling through the front door. Her dress was in rags and tatters, white skin peeped through her torn skirt, the upper mounds of her breasts were plainly visible. "Daddy, Daddy," she called. In three bounds King Tillot was beside her.

"What is it, Marge?"

"That man Weston! Daddy, he attacked me, he tried to kiss me, right out on the street!"

From outside someone roared, "Whoopee, I'm a lone wolf and this is my night to howl! I'm gonna kiss all the women in Hawksville!"

Brennan of the B in a Box said, "Reckon she ain't hurt much, but we better put that ex-detective under lock and key, hadn't we? Hell, he'll be souring the milk of all the muley cows if'n we don't."

It took eight of them, but they finally took ex-Pinkerton man, Weston, to the shack that served as holdover, little used, but there nevertheless. Right up until one o'clock they could hear his song concerning how he was wild and

wooly and full of fleas, how he'd never been curried below the knees.

The talk was still of his winnings, of course, and Nugget Nell told one and all that he'd taken the bank for nearly nine thousand dollars. "That," she observed to the room at large, "is more than the 3-7-77 boys got from the mine office or from Brennan's ranch!"

One o'clock and the revelry had died down, the drunk had quit singing. Two o'clock and a face was pressed against the bars of the makeshift jail. "Jim! Jim Weston!"

Weston said, "Honey! What are you doing here?"

"You sent for me, didn't you? There was gravel at the window, and a voice called up and said you wanted me to come right on down. Who—?"

"Me," said a hoarse voice, "and this is a gun, so keep still. You in there, we got your girl covered. We'll unlock the door and you walk out with your hands in the air."

A moment later, hands raised, Weston gazed at two masked figures, each of whom carried a shotgun, and poor Marge. Marge had simply slipped a kimona over her thin pajamas, donned house shoes and come at what she thought to be her friend's summons.

The hoarse voice went on, "So you thouht to put something over, eh Weston? Hell, I heard you and Marge in the livery stable, I heard it all. Putting two and two together it was easy to see this drunk business was a stall, wasn't it. Now we've got both of you—and we won't take you where you expect to be taken, where you are ready for us. We won't take you to the Vigilante tree! Come on, get on these horses. We're going to ride!"

"What do you want with her? Hell, you've got me trapped. Let her go!"

A hand reached out to chuck Marge beneath the chin. "Her? Hell, I always had an eye on this baby, but she never could see me. Maybe we'll match for her when we get where we are going, my pal and I." His hand roamed a bit and Marge cringed.

Weston cursed, swung a fist. The masked man moved easily and the other crashed his gun down on Weston's skull. Weston's mind went blank.

WHEN he opened his eyes, he tested his bonds, felt they were tight, knew he was on the floor of a cabin. The two masked men were in the center at a table, money between them. One of them said, "That's forty-six hundred apiece, mister. Not bad. Better than either the mine or the ranch house."

"High card for the girl? Hell, we can knock her off and make it look like the dick did it!"

"Why high card? Hell, she's a big girl!"

The other chuckled. Somehow Weston got into a sitting posture. He saw Marge, lashed to a chair, her eyes wide, a gag in her mouth, saw that her clothing had been stripped completely away from her, that her flesh was bruised and soiled. Marge had fought, there was no doubt of that.

Now he was on his knees as the first masked man reached for her.

(Continued on page 102)

GIRL

By STAN WARNER

RED PERRY glanced behind him again, then with a muttered curse brought his quirt down. His pinto tried gallantly to respond but it was no go. He was plumb foundered, his nostrils flaring, his sobbing breath a wheeze in his big chest. After the long ride that day it wasn't fair to expect him to stand up to a breakneck gallop, even if it did mean his rider's life.

Once more Red turned and looked back at the pursuing horsemen. Even in the darkness he could see that they were gaining slowly but surely. Another few minutes and they'd be within gunshot. With a crooked grin he eased his six gun in its holster. There were eight or ten of them. They were bound to get him, but there'd be at least six less of them by the time his Colt had stopped smoking. Then suddenly he stiffened slightly as his eyes, roving ahead, made out the square outlines of the 'dobe buildings, gleaming ghostly white in the moonlight.

He frowned, squinting his eyes as a heavy cloud drifted across the moon's face and everything became darker. He didn't know enough about hacienda layouts here in Mexico to be sure, but if that was a corral near the main house and if the moon stayed behind the cloud long enough, then he had a chance. He leaned forward along his horse's neck.

"Come on, pardner," he whispered. "Everything you got!"

Somehow the horse seemed to understand and draw on some hidden reserve of strength. His stride lengthened perceptibly, became smoother as he stretched himself and though Red, looking behind him, could no longer see the following horsemen, yet it seemed to him that the thunder of their hoofs was fainter.

Now he was almost at the sprawling hacienda and Red pulled his cayuse to the left, off the dusty road. As he peered ahead through the darkness, still leaning forward along his horse's neck, he saw what he was looking for, the barred fence of a corral and inside it, the black slowly shifting forms of many horses. He swung his pinto still further to the left so that he was driving straight for the fence.

"And now," he gritted, "Neck or nothing!"

Judging the distance as well as he could in the darkness, he lifted his mount and sailed over the topmost bar into the corral proper. Almost before his lathered horse had slid to a heaving stop, he was out of the saddle. The other horses were starting to mill in panic but with the speed and dexterity of a born horseman, Red cut out a big roan. He worked the horse next to the rail, then dropped the two top bars. Raising his quirt, he slashed the roan across the quarters. As if he had been shot out of a gun, the roan leaped the remaining bar and went thundering up the road as if all hell were after him.

Red stood there, six gun in hand,

in the SADDLE

Pursued as an outlaw, the stranger takes the first refuge he can find . . . and has a chance soon enough to show his gratitude to the girl who saves him

"Come—show this Yankee how nice a Mexican girl can be!"

waiting. The drumming hoofs of the vaqueros who had pursued him all the way from Taxo were almost opposite him now. Would they fall for his ruse and follow the riderless horse he had sent galloping up the road or would they turn in here at the hacienda?

It seemed to him that they were slowing up. His thumb snapped back the hammer of his Colt, cocking it, then. . .

"There! There he goes!" shouted a voice, and then they were off, the whole pack of them, after the panic-stricken, riderless roan.

Again the grim smile played over Red's thin lips as he uncocked and holstered his gun. Then he froze once more, standing next to the corral fence like a silent, waiting figure of enduring bronze.

LIGHTS appeared in the windows of the small building on the far side of the corral. He heard the sound of voices, then several figures came sleepily out of the door and started to move towards the horses. With an exclamation, Red replaced the bars he had let down and stooping low, ran towards the hacienda. He didn't want to do any shooting if he could help it. If there were only some place he could hide for an hour or so, until everyone went to sleep again. . . .

He was running along the side of the hacienda now, the mozos and vaqueros who had come out of the house on the far side of the corral still coming on behind him, but ignorant of his presence. Then suddenly he heard the rattle of a bolt in the door ahead of him. He was caught. If he went on he would run smack into whoever was opening the door. If he went back he would be seen by the men behind him. There was always his six-gun as a last resort, but in the meantime his eyes had been busy and he saw an open, darkened window immediately above him. Just as the door started to swing back, he crouched, leaped and caught the edge of the window sill. With a twist of his lean body he pulled himself up and dropped inside the room, then knelt down, listening.

"Don Jorge," called a voice from immediately below him, outside the house. "Are you all right?"

"All right? Why should I not be all right?" spluttered the man in the doorway in irascible tones. "What do you mean by running around and yelling in the middle of the night? Are you all drunk?"

"No, Don Jorge," answered another voice. "But we heard many men galloping up the road and we did not know. . ."

"You do not even know you are alive, you idiots!" shouted Don Jorge. "*Madre de Dios,* first I am robbed, then I am kept awake all night by a herd of lunatic servants! Will you leave me in peace?"

"Yes, Don Jorge," answered the first voice again. "We are sorry. . . ."

"Bah!" snapped Don Jorge and slammed the door shut with a bang. Whispering among themselves, the mozos and vaqueros started to go back to their quarters.

Red grinned quietly. Sounded as though the old buck had had a tough day, but it couldn't have been as tough as his, Red's . . . and he wasn't out of the woods yet. He still had to make his getaway from

the hacienda without disturbing anyone else.

Slowly he rose to his feet, and then a voice spoke behind him! A woman's voice!

"So, Ramon," it said softly. "You were not fooled by my coldness and indifference! You knew that I was still a woman and could be won by the daring and romantic move. You are clever, *mi corazon*, cleverer than I had thought!"

RED stood there, rigid, frozen. He had expected death twice tonight, expected to stave it off for as long as he could with smoking guns, but he had certainly never expected to step into the room of a young woman and be taken for her sweetheart!

What should he do? Disclose himself? If he did she would scream and rouse the house. He would have to fight the outraged old man who must be her father or some other relative. On the other hand. . . . His heart was starting to thud faster and faster. His temples were throbbing and his muscles knotting up voluntarily. There was a dry taste in the back of his throat.

"Well?" asked the woman.

Then there was the pad of bare feet as she came towards him. He still stood there, indecisive, a statue of petrified manhood.

"Ha!" she whispered softly. "You think I still wish to tantalize you? To lead you on and then laugh? No, Ramon." And then a warm, fragrant body was pressed tight to his, soft arms were stealing up and around his neck.

He was only flesh and blood. No matter what other thoughts had been in his mind, they fled now. With a sudden intake of breath, his arms went around her, feeling the satiny smoothness of her skin through the thin silk of her night dress, feeling her lithe body sway in closer to him in the clutch of his embrace.

She sighed softly as his arms tightened and he could feel the resilient softness of her young breasts crushed against his chest! He bent down, found her mouth and glued his own to it. Her lips were warm, moist, eager. They parted under the eager demand of his and he could feel her hands clutching him tighter and tighter in the ecstasy of their embrace. The effect of his caresses on her was obvious in the eagerness of her own response, in the yielding limpness of her warm body. Yet, if she knew that he was not the man she expected—!

THEN he heard it, the sound that subconsciously he had been listening for, the drumming of horses' hoofs! The men who had pursued him from Taxco had discovered his ruse and were coming back!

The girl heard it too. One hand clutched his arm as the horses stopped outside the hacienda and voices called for Don Jorge. Red's arms tightened involuntarily as he heard Don Jorge, shouting angrily, open the door. He heard the men talking to him in excited whispers and then the door shut again.

"Let me go!" whispered the girl. She ran across the room and listened at the door for a moment. The room was so dark that Red could only make out dimly the lovely lines of her body. She turned.

"Quick!" she hissed. "Get into the bed!"

Red's hand was on his gun, then the crooked smile came over his lips again and with a shrug, he walked over to the bed and got into it. Without a moment's hesitation the girl threw herself down beside him and pulled the blankets up over them both. Red could feel her warm body tremble slightly and almost unconsciously his arm crept up and went around her reassuringly. She pinched his hand.

"Ah, *querido!*" she murmured. "You give me much trouble!" Then there came a thundering knock on the door. "Down low!" she whispered. "So they can't see you behind me!"

"Conchita!" said Don Jorge's voice. "Conchita, wake up! Open the door!"

Her startled cry of surprise was an admirable piece of acting. Red grinned in spite of himself.

"Uncle Jorge!" she said. "What is it? The door is open. Come in!"

Red heard the door open. He could not see her uncle, Don Jorge, come in. He could see nothing from under the muffling folds of the blanket. His whole world was bounded by that blanket; yet he was conscious of Conchita's nearness . . . of the soft curves of her body, almost touching his, the heady fragrance of her filling his nostrils in a sensuous redolence that fanned the fire already in his blood.

"Conchita, you are all right?" There was a note of relief in Don Jorge's voice. "The Saints be praised! First I thought it was the nightmare of your drunken mozos but now it appears it may be true!"

"But what, Uncle?" asked Conchita, one of her hands holding Red's either to draw strength from them or to warn him against any movement that might betray his presence.

"Ay de mi!" answered Don Jorge. "You know that gringo, that Americano bandit who held up my paymaster yesterday on his way to the mine? Well, he was seen in Taxco this afternoon! He walked into the Cantina de los Flores as bold as a monkey of brass!"

"But how could anyone know it was the gringo when Gomez said he was masked when he robbed him?" asked Conchita.

"Because he was wearing the same clothes!" answered Don Jorge. "The same white woolly chaps, the same black and white checked shirt, the same red neckerchief. Even the money he threw on the bar was in gold pesos like the money he took from Gomez!"

"I see," said Conchita. "But what has this to do with waking me at night? Is he not in the Taxco jail?"

"No!" answered Don Jorge. "He is not! When the men called the *jefe politico,* the sheriff, and tried to arrest him, he shot his way out of the cantina, wounding four men! He is a diablo! He escaped, and though his horse was tired, the men could not catch him. He rode past here and when the men thought they had him, they found they had been following a riderless horse. One of our horses!"

Conchita said nothing, but her body had suddenly become cold, hard, stiff. Her fingers became rigid and jerked from his grasp.

"That is why I looked in here," went on Don Jorge. "The men thought he might be hiding in the hacienda, but I do not think it possible." Red could hear the door open again, "Good night, Conchita."

"Good night, Uncle Jorge," said Conchita and then the door shut.

AS QUICKLY as though she had just discovered a snake in bed with her, Conchita twisted away from Red and leaped to the floor. She wrapped the blanket about her but not before Red had caught a glimpse of the lovely, swelling curves of her body in the bright moonlight that now flooded the room. She crouched against the far wall muffled in the blanket her face tigerish with rage as Red swung his long legs over the bed's edge and stood up.

"White woolly chaps, checked shirt, red neckerchief," said Conchita sweeping him from head to foot with blazing eyes. "So! Not content with stealing my uncle's gold, you wished also to steal my love!"

"Conchita," said Red. "You've got to believe me. When I jumped in this window to hide, I had no idea that there was anyone in the room."

"Ah, but afterwards, when I called you Ramon, did you protest?" hissed Conchita. "No! You accepted my caresses as though they were really meant for you!"

"Could I help it?" asked Red, and strangely enough he meant every word he said. "Do you not think it possible to feel one's heart go out to a voice? To fall in love with a face one has not seen? To know it is beautiful, even in the darkness?"

Her face softened a little. Perhaps it was his earnestness, perhaps the fact that he was cool, calm and made no attempt to escape helped to mollify her. The fact that he was tall, lean, with blue eyes burning in a hawk face could have done him no harm, and her memory of his strong arms and burning kisses.

"But you do admit that you robbed Gomez, Uncle Jorge's paymaster yesterday?" she said. "That you were chased here from Taxco by the vaqueros?"

"Certainly not!" answered Red surprisingly. "Chased by the men, yes. But up to now I did not even know why."

Conchita's eyes widened.

"But those clothes?" she said.

"Listen, Conchita," said Red. "I'm a Texan. My name is Red Perry. I crossed the border and came down here in sort of a hurry, I'll admit. I tangled with a rannie in a saloon at Midkiff and had to plug him. I was wandering around your country sort of forlornlike, without any dinero, dough, you know. Wal, last night I stop at a hacienda and ask for some food. There's a young fella there, dark, good looking, almost my size. He spots me for a gringo and even though I'm tired and dirty, my clothes all tore, he treats me like a pal. Puts me up for the night, gives me a new set of clothes . . . these here . . . and gives me some money. Tells me it's an old Mexican custom."

"He gave you . . . those clothes?" asked Conchita frowning.

"Yeah," answered Red. "When I

walk into the cantina, ask for a drink and slap down a coin, everyone starts whispering and before I know it, I gotta shoot my way out. As God's my witness, that's the truth!"

For a moment Conchita looked into his eyes.

"And I believe you!" she said. "You would kill a man in fair fight, yes. If you needed money you would take it . . . but you would never lie!"

"Conchita!" Red's eyes were glowing. "I . . . I . . ." and then he had leaped forward and swept her up in his arms. He pressed a burning kiss on her lips and felt her body trembling. At first she tried feebly to push him away, then her arms stole up around his neck and the concealing blanket dropped unheeded to the floor as she pressed her thinly clad body against his once more.

"And to think I believed it was Ramon!" whispered Conchita. "To think that I believed his kisses and embraces could thrill me so! Oh, Red, querido! Loved One!"

Suddenly they separated and looked deep into each other's eyes, listening. They had paid no heed to the loud hoof beats when the vaqueros from Taxco had left, but this was a different sound; stealthy, somehow menacing.

RED leaped to the window and looked out. He could see the horsemen in the darkness only faintly as they turned off the road towards the hacienda.

"They're coming back, honey," he whispered to Conchita. "And now somehow I feel differently about this whole thing. I can't take a chance with your good name by letting you hide me again. I'm going . . . and when I come back it'll be for you . . . and I'll be able to tell you who framed me for that hold-up."

"No, no, Red." Conchita's eyes were wide with fear. "They are too close. You must. . . ." He silenced her protests with a sudden kiss, then he was out of the window, landing catlike and silently on hands and feet.

Crouching low he ran along the side of the house, passing within fifty feet of the oncoming night riders, and ducked between the bars of the corral. His horse moved up to him and he stroked its neck abstractedly, watching.

The vaqueros were acting strangely. They did not ride up to the front door as they had done before, but spread out along the hacienda wall. One of them, the man who seemed to be their leader, reined in his horse just under Conchita's window. He gave some whispered command to his men then, before Red could even gasp with surprise, before it had even occurred to him that these were not the same men who had wakened Don Jorge before, he had stood up on his saddle, grasped the window sill and leaped into Conchita's room!

Red stood there a moment, his mouth open, stunned by the suddenness of his move. Then he heard Conchita's gasp of surprise in the silent night air.

"Who's there?" she said. "Who is it?"

"Silence!" hissed a voice. The moon came out from behind a cloud again and everything was flooded

with silver light. The light must have filled Conchita's room also for she cried out, "Ramon! What are you doing here? What is the meaning of this?"

"It means, my dear Conchita, that I have had enough of your feminine ways! This is *my* way, a man's way."

Conchita's laugh was bitter.

"And not so long ago I thought I loved you, would have welcomed an act like this!" she said scornfully. "Bah! Get out before I call my uncle and he takes a horse whip to you!"

"I will get out," answered Ramon. "But you are coming with me. And by the time you next see your uncle, you will be glad to stay with me!" There was a barely concealed note of ardor in his voice. "I will see to that!"

"You fool! Do you not think he will follow at once?" asked Conchita, but though her words were brave there was a note of uncertainty in the way she said them.

Ramon laughed mockingly.

"Follow where? The gringo who robbed his paymaster yesterday was seen out here tonight. I met the vaqueros who chased him from Taxco coming back into town. Your uncle will think that *he* kidnaped you."

SO THAT was the diabolical plan! To make it seem as though he, Red, had stolen Conchita! With a curse, Red snapped his Colt out of its holster and cocked it.

"Come!" snarled Ramon. "We have talked enough." And just as the sounds of a scuffle came to Red's ears, just as he ducked under the corral bars and started running towards the house, there came another interruption, the sound of someone beating on the door of Conchita's room.

"Conchita! Conchita! What is it?" called Don Jorge's voice. Red checked himself. The eyes of Ramon's vaquero's were on the window above them. He heard the sound of the door opening and then Don Jorge's startled oath.

"*Sangre de Dios,* Ramon Quierrez! What are you . . ." then there was the sudden boom of a shot, a scream from Conchita and the sound of a body falling. The figure of a man appeared in the window, Conchita struggling in his arms. The man's face was plainly visible in the bright moonlight and for a second Red stared at him incredulously, unbelievingly. Ramon Quierrez the man whom Conchita had taken him for, the man who was now abducting her, was the Mexican who had given him the clothes and money the day before!

The Mexican dropped into the saddle with Conchita gripped tightly in his arms, then with a yell of rage, Red cut loose. He was afraid to fire at Ramon for fear of hitting Conchita, but his first shot got the kidnaper's black horse. The animal reared up, his front hoofs pawing air, then he plunged forward and fell. Ramon's vaqueros, recovering from their surprise, wheeled about and started firing back. The air was filled with the boom of guns and the excited shouts of men. The lurid gleam of powder flashes stabbed through the night.

It never occurred to Red to take cover. He stood there, his back to

(Continued on page 103)

WHIP HAND

By TOM BRADLEY

He thought he was running the guns for the harassed Americans. He didn't know that his partners, with the aid of a scheming woman, were selling him out to the Mexicans

TOM RIDER, the young trader, stood under the dark trees along the bank of the Guadeloupe River and gave quiet orders to his four negroes who were finishing their job of unloading rifle cases and powder casks off the raft that was tied to a cottonwood tree on the lapping bank of the river.

"Santa Fe" Mearson stood beside him, directing the line of dark figures that heaved the cases up and disappeared with them toward Mearson's Trading Post, a quarter of a mile from the bank. The night was cloudy and the men worked silently in the dark.

"Well, that's all," the young trader said when the last of the casks had disappeared on the shoulder of Mearson's man. "Five hundred of them new Sharps rifles, five hundred pounds of lead and five kegs of powder. Tell you, raftin' that stuff up nearly eighty miles upstream in the dark is no picnic, what with stray detachments of Mexican troops patrolling the river clear down to the Gulf."

Which statement was putting it mildly. In 1835 the white Texans had got enough of the tyranny of the Mexican dictator, Santa Anna, and were refusing to surrender their arms and vacate their homesteads according to his orders. The Mexican had retaliated by sending his brother-in-law, General Cos, up to the state with an army of picked troops to put down the revolt and to disarm every white Texan.

Mearson's voice at Rider's elbow said, "Reckon the boys in Gonzales will pay good prices for these new-fangled Sharps. Gin'ral Cos jist raided the town a week ago come tomorrow, and the boys ain't got no defenses left except'n them brass four-pounders, and almost no powder for 'em. You and me stands to make a passel o' money. Go on up to the post while I see the stuff is proper hid. Lita'll take keer o' you."

Tom Rider had roamed and traded the vast new area of Texas from the boats on the Gulf bringing goods from New Orleans through San Antonio de Bexar to the Llano Estacado where the still warlike Apache Indians traded him hides and buffalo robes for his trinkets, but his trading had always been open and above board, and he didn't like this business of sneaking his men and his goods up the

It was the girl who finally got the buffalo gun.

river by night and hiding out like a criminal by day.

And as he trudged up the weed-lined path toward Mearson's Post, he knew in his heart that he didn't like Mearson, either. There was something about the man that didn't ring true, despite his talk of loyalty to the Texas cause. And still further, he would have preferred to do business with Lane, who ran the general store in Gonzales, Lane who was the father of his Mary.

It was hard being out on his trips and away from her, but that was the trader's life, and he had to do it until the time came when he could start his own store and have Mary there with him. . . .

AT the hewn-pine building that served Mearson as store and home there was the yellow glow of an oil lamp shining dully out the open-cut window in front. Tom

Rider stood just outside the open door, his figure framed in the yellow light. He stopped and stood still, a towering figure, lean and tanned, in coonskin cap and buckskin jerkin, his long rifle in his hand and home-tempered skinning-hunting knife at his waist. He was the figure of that strong, self-reliance incarnate in the pioneer, the man who carved his home out of the wilderness and who met life standing up with s h o u l d e r s squared. It was the like of him that chafed at the tyranny of the Mexican dictator.

He stood there hesitant, halted by a cry from within the cabin. As his eyes adjusted to the light he saw within the sod-floored room a towering giant of a creature, a gimlet-eyed man with long black hair down his back, saw this husky grasping a girl by the shoulder, jerking at her as she frantically twisted in his embrace.

The girl was struggling, her small fists knotted and flailing into the leering face of the leather-jacketed brute. "Don't!" she cried. "Keep your filthy hands off me."

"So Buffalo Baxter ain't good enough for you, you little slut!" the man barked. "Well, I likes 'em wild. It's more fun tamin' 'em."

The man's big arm encircled the girl and he pulled her closer to him, one dirty hand grasping her chin and bringing her red lips up to his. His owlish face buried itself into hers as he kissed her hungrily. The girl slapped him with a stinging slap squarely across the eyes. The man cursed as she jerked away from him, cursed and grabbed at her greedily, his eyes stripping her.

His fingers caught in the hem of the linsey-woolsey dress she wore and he jerked, ripped away the garment as the girl fled. He stood with the torn rag hanging in his hand, surprise written on his ugly, stubbled face.

The girl, stripped almost nude, her wide black eyes glittering, stood poised a single moment, then realizing her freedom darted for the door like a faun, her feet pattering on the floor. Her white body, her black hair whipping over brief undergarments, shone like ivory in the yellow light of the lamp. The firm roundness of her breasts swayed gently, tauntingly. She dived out the door—

And into the arms of Tom Rider.

At first startled, she looked up to see his face, then sank more deeply into the comfort of his protection, as though now she were safe.

Rider held her tightly, looked at the oncoming man. The gigantic Buffalo Baxter came staggering out, dragging the rag of the girl's garment in his hand, his mouth drooling curses. "Where the hell be ye, ye little squaw? Wait till I gets my hands on ye—"

He had reached the door and stumbled out. He caught sight of the pair of them, Tom Rider and the girl cringing in his arms, and he reeled drunkenly.

"Come here," he said to the girl, ignoring the trader. "My little antelope, I want to show you the love of a real man—of a buffalo hunter—"

Tom Rider said coldly, "Get back in there, Baxter. The girl don't want your filthy claws on her."

The beetle-browed buffalo hunter reeled slightly and caught himself

by the jamb of the door. He looked at Rider with one eye half closed. "Oh, it's the gun runner, eh? Well, get outa my way. This little filly is mine. Her old man done give her to me fer a dozen buffalo robes. Come on gal—"

"You'd better take back your robes and *vamos,*" Rider said coldly, "because it looks like the gal will not be going with you."

"You don't say them things to Buffalo Baxter," the man growled. He dropped the grayish rag which had been the dress, and his hand went toward his belt. Rider saw black-rimmed fingernails groping around the deerfoot handle of the man's skinning-knife. Deep in Baxter's throat there was the rumble of his curses.

Tom Rider gently got the girl out of his arms. He took two steps forward, and his solid brown fist knotted into a hard ball. Before the buffalo hunter got his knife out of its sheath Rider's fist shot out and caught the bone of his stubbly jaw. The blow cracked like the pop of a bursted paper bag.

The big hunter grunted and his knees became sponges under him. His eyes went upward until only the whites showed, his legs doubled under him and he fell on his face with his body halfway across the door sill. He grunted and rolled over on his back, and then lay quiet.

The girl had picked up the remains of her garment. She caught Rider by the arm while with the other hand she held the cloth like a drape in front of her soft breasts. "Quick!" she whispered, "before pap comes."

TOGETHER they disappeared into the darkness, he broad shouldered in his tanned deerskin jacket, she a white wisp against the darkness of the woods in front of the cabin. She clung to his arm, and the nearness of her warm white body sent a thrill through the young trader that burned into him and blazed up into the longings of a man long without the company of women.

She stopped in a glade where a beam of moonlight broke through the heavy foliage of the trees, and Tom Rider felt that he was standing in the presence of some lovely goddess of love.

"I'm glad you took me away from him, Tom Rider," the girl said in a kind of purring voice that was rich with invitation. "He was terrible." Then after a hesitancy she concluded, "But you are not."

Even in the dimness of the forest, Tom Rider could see the invitation written on the face of the girl. She was young, and it surprised him even while her nearness made his pulse leap. "That's all right, Miss," he said. "I'd do a thing like that for your father any time."

The girl looked downward, standing before him and plucking at the soft leather fringe of his sleeve. "Then you didn't do it—for me?"

"Why, of course, for you," Rider said quickly, and cursed himself because he couldn't use small talk very well. His was a direct way of talking and doing things, and he never could understand why women talked like that, tried to trip a man up. "Of course I did it for you. But it wasn't anything."

The girl looked up into his face,

and there was gratitude in her eyes that were black in the moonlight, with little specks of fire reflected in them, and tears on the lashes. Her arm slid gently around his neck, and her head went onto his breast.

And hunger clawed at Tom Rider, the hunger of a man for a woman, and his arm went around her. She clung to him as though her body would melt into his own, and Tom Rider felt the firm pressure of her warm breasts searing the very flesh of him. He drank of the sweetness of her lips and felt them tremble under the crushing ardor of his kiss.

He enfolded her slight body in his arms and the little ray of moonlight sparkled like fairy fires in the flecks of her eyes as she looked up at him; he buried his mouth in the softness of her throat while she clung to him. . . .

She was a girl, but the emotion that pulsed through her body was that of a full-blooded woman, and it was igniting the very soul of a strong man. . . .

IT could have been hours when that voice interrupted them—the harsh voice of Mearson, the girl's father. "So it looks like time for gittin' ready a weddin' feast, eh, Rider?" Another gruff voice beside Mearson cackled coarsely. "Reg'lar love birds, ain't they?"

Rider looked in the semi-darkness, saw Mearson leering at them and, beside him, the swaying form of the buffalo hunter. He felt the girl tremble in his arms, then hastily throw the discarded dress protectingly about her as she scrambled away from him.

Tom Rider faced the two men. "No, there will not be any wedding feast, Mearson. But if you'll take my advice you'll keep a better lookout over your daughter when there's skunks around."

"Not knowin' jist what you mean, and meanin' no offense myself," Mearson retured, "it seems kinda like we're all in the same boat now—kinda branded with the same iron. An' you bein' one of us—"

"I am not one of you, that I know about," Rider snapped, when he saw the significant leer on Mearson's face. "Whatever you mean, I'm not one of you. Keep our business separate from personals. If you've got a desire to explain what you mean, then out with it."

"In due time—in due time," Mearson smirked. "But it kinda looks like business and personals is already mixed up." Turning to the girl he continued, "You an' Rider aimin' to marry up, gal?"

The girl put her arm around Rider's waist. "Yes, we aim to," she answered.

Mearson rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully a moment, then said, "Reckon in that case you an' me's a crowd here, Buffalo. There's a jug o' prime corn back there we ought to be samplin'."

Tom Rider picked up the rifle he had laid on the ground. "Don't go away on my account," he said, "because I'm just leaving for Gonzales. I've got business there."

"Not with that daughter of Lane's I take it," Mearson answered queerly. "Anyway, I reckon we'll see you there. And in the meantime it might be a good idea if you was to calculate that you are

tarred with the same brush that the rest of us is now, and be right smart careful. Particular around Lane and Jim Plunkett, if you see him."

"Meanin'?" Rider snapped.

"Not sayin' what I'm meanin', I'm still warnin' you."

"You can go straight to hell, for all of me, and take your warnings with you," Tom Rider answered, and stalked off into the dark to round up his men.

TOM RIDER had more work to do before he reached Gonzales. With his men, he cut his log raft apart and let the legs float back down the river, thus destroying any evidence of his trip. Then he visited several of the farmers around the countryside. From them he learned that the unrest in Texas had smouldered up to the point where it was likely to burst out into flames at any minute.

The Mexicans had arrested the whole group of Texas representatives, including Travis and Fannin, and had thrown them into a Mexican jail to rot. Sam Houston was going through the country, along with other patriots, and secretly organizing them into a revolutionary force. Every man was suspicious of his neighbor, and to be caught hiding guns or ammunition from the Mexcian soldiers was a sure warrant of death before their firing squads. And not even all the whites were for the revolution. Neighbor spied upon neighbor, and distrust was everywhere —distrust and smouldering resentment.

It was late in the afternoon when the weary form of the young trader reached the little town of Gonzales. But as he neared Lane's store, Rider's steps quickened. For Mary Lane waited for him there.

Tom Rider threw open the door of the pine frame building and walked into the general storeroom. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he stopped and took in the scene, leaning his buffalo gun against the wall just inside the door.

The sound of voices stopped when he entered, halted suddenly as though there were a conspiracy against him. He was quick to sense that something was wrong, but he couldn't tell for the moment just what it was.

Then he saw Mearson and his daughter sitting at one of the two pine tables where the Lanes served meals to travelers in from the outlying farms. They were eating a supper being served by Mary Lane.

Then Rider's lips went tight as he saw that Buffalo Baxter was the third one at the table, and that the three of them were together as though the occurrence of last night had not happened.

Mary placed a platter of fried deer meat and hominy, and a plate of hot soda biscuits in front of them just as Rider entered. The bearded buffalo hunter reached out and encircled her waist with his arm, leering at her suggestively. The girl tried to twist herself out of his embrace, her face flushed red in her embarrassment.

The buffalo hunter laughed at her confusion. "What's the matter, gal?" he taunted her. "Don't say you ain't used to a little affection?"

Tears came to the girl's eyes, and her lips trembled.

Tom Rider walked across the room and stood with his tall form hovered menacingly over the seated hunter. "Have I got to follow you all around keepin' your filthy hands off of women?" he asked threateningly.

Baxter's red-rimmed eyes narrowed as he recognized Rider, "I don't see's how it's any o' yore business to interfere between me an' this filly—you bein' practically married to Mearson's gal."

Rider's lips went tight and he cast a quick glance at Mary Lane. He saw her eyes grow wide in surprise, then her face took on an expression of indifference, although he could see that it was an effort on her part.

"I'm not practically married to anybody," he said, then turning to the girl. "Mary, don't believe a word of it. There's no truth in that man's words."

The girl said with an effort to be calm. "I didn't know that you even knew these people—"

Mearson's coarse voice broke out in a cackle. "Don't know us? Why he's already part of the family. Why him and Lulu here was only last night tellin' us they was aimin' to marry up, wasn't you, Lulu?"

The girl smirked and hung her head. "Why, yes, paw."

Mary Lane looked slowly at Tom Rider as though she had been stunned with a pole-axe. Her face was immobile as she bravely kept back the tears. "I hope you'll be happy," she said in a faraway kind of voice, and then she turned and suddenly left the room.

Mearson watched her go, then looked at Rider. "Sit down," he said sharply. "It's time you knowed which side yore bread was buttered on."

RIDER stood squarely on his feet and leaned over the table, balancing his muscular body with the knuckles of one hand. "You can bet it's time I found out something," he said. "And I'm finding it out right now. I want to know what these hints mean that you've been sowing around since last night, and I want to know the meaning of this frameup you and this girl and this hide-skinner are trying to cram down my throat. You get busy and spill a few beans, *pronto*."

Mearson answered with calculated slowness, watching the effect of his words on the trader. "You're in deep enough now so you can't crawfish without dancing from a rope under a sycamore tree," he said evenly. "You knowed all time that them guns wasn't fer white Texans. You and me and Buffalo is supplyin' guns to the Apaches, that the greasers is armin' to help 'em ag'in the Texans. You brings 'em up the river, I handle the business end and Buffalo trades 'em to the Injuns—"

"You're a liar as far as I'm concerned," Rider barked angrily. "You told me they were for the Texans—"

"Tell that to Old Man Lane or Plunkett, who is the committee for safety, and see if they believe you. They'll organize a posse to hang you faster'n a jackrabbit can lope. You ain't got a chance—except to keep yore mouth shut and keep on with us. If you don't—"

He nodded significantly toward the door. Tom Rider looked up just

in time to see Mary Lane's father and another man enter. Old Lane was short and heavy-built, and wore a heavy head of white hair and white mustache. Plunkett was lean and range-hardened, and there was no softness in either man.

Lane and Plunkett came on through the store headed toward Lane's office in the rear. Mary's father looked at Tom, said, "Howdy," with a curt reserve which Tom had never experienced before, and went on through the back door, Plunkett following.

"See," Mearson said, "He's seen you plottin' with me and Buffalo. Try and tell him you ain't doin' business with us."

"Does Lane know what you're doing?"

"He might have his suspicions, but he ain't got no proof—much as he'd like to get it."

"Then I'll give him proof," Rider said, getting up from the chair he'd slid into.

He heard the click of metal, and saw the barrel of a cap-and-ball horse pistol peek over the edge of the table in front of Buffalo Baxter. "You won't be doin' that, hombre," he said in a low voice. "You won't get but one word out."

"Shoot and be damned to you," Rider said. "I'm throwing in with Lane."

"And throwin' his little gal to me," Baxter said. "She'd make me a good squaw around camp, these long nights, and if I put a bullet in you, then there ain't nothin' but her paw standin' between me and her—and I kin take care of him the first dark night."

Rider's eyes went narrow as he faced this dilemma. Mearson added his bit, "Buffalo's right," he said. "You can't even give 'em warnin'. With you dead and him not knowin' things, the gal wouldn't have a chance. And if Buffalo kills you, we got a plum' good out. We got plenty o' proof you brought the guns in, and we can say you was squabblin' about the pay. You're guilty or dead, either which way you turn."

RIDER looked at the Mearson girl sitting across the table from him. And he realized now that she was no girl at all, but had the development and the hot nature of a full grown woman. She sat with elbows on the table, head in her hands. And there burned in the eyes that fastened on Rider something that even now in the midst of this conspiracy made the warm blood course through his veins.

She was his for the asking, and there was about her shapely body, with its well formed breasts, contoured tightly by the cotton waist she wore, everything to appeal to a man who spent long days of loneliness.

And Mary had scorned him, and believed that he was actually in love with this girl. He might be able to convince her, and again he might not. On this side there was offered good money in running guns for the Indians, there was this hot blooded, pulsating creature who could make his blood race with her kisses—yet whose love he felt would be worth little.

But on the other side there was Mary—and there were all the Texans, beset on the one hand by Indians and on the other hand by

(Continued on page 107)

By PAUL HANNA

HER voice was honey, and so were her red lips; and in the yellow lamplight, Brad Wilson did not notice the bitter lines graved at the corners of her mouth, nor the hardness of her hazel eyes. A cowpuncher drifting in from the hills of Northern New Mexico would be entirely too thrilled to be critical of a nice girl — which Maude Hillis seemed to be.

It had all happened so smoothly that Wilson had no time to wonder how he and the redhead had ended up in her room; and as she managed to discard the sensuously rustling silken dress, he likewise ceased wondering *why!*

Maude's legs, sleek and shapely, became a succession of ever increasing thrills as his eyes swept up, avidly drinking in their fascinations. She was built to stop a stampede—or start one! And as she took a step toward him, her out-thrust breasts slid quiveringly behind the fragile, clinging slip.

Wilson's chronically querying, wide open blue eyes were on the verge of popping out of his guileless face, and he felt as though he had swallowed a gallon of tequila. Just looking at her was hot work; and when her arms snaked out and about his broad shoulders, he wished that he had more than the $73.60 he'd brought to Las Cruces. With a gal like Maude, a gent would want to step high, wide, and handsome.

"Honey," she murmured, accenting her endearment with a wriggle that nearly made him vanish in a puff of smoke, "wouldn't you be more comfortable if you took off your guns? Anyway . . . that belt buckle hurts—"

It would, the way he had drawn her to him, shaping her supple figure to his own stocky pattern. And the flattening of her pert breasts against his chest left him twitching all over, as though a million ants were swarming out of his bootlegs.

Brad, dizzied by the sweetness that billowed from the well filled yoke of her one remaining garment, broke clear and unbuckled his belt, hung it over the back of a chair.

"Brad," she ecstatically sighed, wriggling closer. And then she just sighed again. There was no need to say anything else.

And with Maude's lithe figure snuggling as close as the thickness of the tenuous slip would allow, the tawdry little room was a paradise. Women were scarce in New Mexico, particularly nice ones . . .

BUT Brad didn't realize how scarce they were until the door crashed wide open and a white weasel eyed runt with a snub nosed derringer barged in. This, in spite of Wilson's certainty that Maude had locked the door.

"Ohhh—it's my husband!" she screamed.

"So that's the way you carry on while I'm running my faro game?" gritted Mr. Hillis. "By God—I'll kill you both—"

"Cleave!" she shrieked. "Don't —Oh, good Heaven—"

"I didn't know she was yore wife," stuttered Wilson. "Listen, yuh short horn—"

DEATH THREAT

Brad was indignant when he was taken in by the old badger game. Never after that would he trust any woman! But all that was before he met Gwenn and she was kidnaped and taken to the hell-hole in Molino del Rey

She squeezed slugs until the gun was empty.

"You'll pay for this!" stormed Hillis. "Empty out your pockets! Every damn' cent! I won't bother to kill a tramp like you. Or her!"

The old badger game. Wilson did not mind the loss of his poke, but being taken that way scorched him like a maverick under the iron. There was no arguing with that deadly little derringer, two yards away.

"Dig into your pockets!" snapped the gambler, convinced that Wilson had no concealed weapons.

Brad obeyed, trembling hands fumbling awkwardly. Hillis grinned, eyes avariciously gleaming. His victim was scared silly; a pop eyed, moon faced yokel instinctively awed by a wronged husband. Most men are.

He snorted when Wilson's shaky fingers dropped a broad gold piece to the floor. It was rolling toward a crack. Hillis stooped, gun still pointing. He did not suspect that he was biting—

Not until Wilson's frosty nerve changed the picture, all in one deadly instant. Neither hand nor body trembled as he moved, swift as a sidewinder.

Maude had no chance to scream. The roar of a pair of .45s smothered the double blast of the derringer and the spattering of the lamp chimney, shattered by the gambler's wild shot. Hillis had four slugs in his head before he hit the floor, still clawing at the mocking gold piece that had stopped an inch from the crack.

Wilson sighed, retrieved the coins he had deliberately spilled, then gently reproached. "M'am, I guess I desarved suthin' like this fur thinkin' yuh was a nice gal."

And before the alarm spread, he was larruping out of Las Cruces. Covering the forty odd miles to El Paso was quicker than bothering to prove self defense.

BRAD spent the following week in hell roaring El Paso, looking for a trail boss who needed a top hand to drive a herd north into Kansas; and he rared up like a gun shy mustang every time anything resembling a nice girl crossed his path. He would probably have stuck to his sour resolution, but for one fact: his room was in a modern hotel, a frame structure flung together with unseasoned lumber.

So, without any intent on his part, he got an earful that set him thinking.

"I told you," declared a woman in the adjoining room, "I don't want to sing in your *cantina*. Particularly not now."

"But, Mees Barry," smoothly protested a man with a Spanish accent, "eet ees a verree nize place. Verree re-fined, no? An' the pay ees—"

"I don't want or need any pay," she wearily cut in. "Now please leave. It's late."

"But you should see my boss first. He weel convince you. An' me, I am *locó* about you."

What followed was blurred and wordless: a gasp, a rustle of silk, heavy breathing, and the scrape of a chair. The subdued struggle made Wilson's blood boil with indignation mixed with envy; but it was none of his business. She had something like that coming, receiving visitors in her room at that hour.

Yet he was on his feet, indeci-

sively poised. Then he heard her wrathful, inarticulate cry, a sharp smack, and the Mexican's gasp and stifled curse as he lurched back.

"*Carramba!* You weel scratch an' slap me?" Then, mockingly: "But eef you scream, I weel tell the management you demand money from me. That you are wan bad woman—now weel you listen?"

"Ohhh—" She was on the verge of tears, trying to subdue her wrath and humiliation. The Mexican had her cornered with a plausible threat.

Or so he thought until Brad Wilson, now in the hall, hurled two hundred pounds of hard sinew at the panel. It splintered, being flimsy, boom time construction, and Wilson came through, driving fragments ahead of him.

His attack was so sudden that neither Miss Barry nor the Mexican had had time to recover their balance.

She had little feet, trim ankles, and the sleekest calves that ever glorified silk hosiery. Her negligee, open and flying, exposed pert young breasts that peeped from a displaced *bandeau.*

"Git yore paws offen that gal!" rasped Wilson as the girl and the Mexican hastily untangled.

The Spick, snarling and wrathful, was on his feet like a cat, and simultaneously, a slim knife blossomed in his hand. At that short range, a hurled blade is deadly as a bullet. Worse than that, the girl for an instant partially shielded her assailant.

Brad, unable to risk a shot, flattened and lunged, empty handed. The hiss of the knife and its thud as it buried itself in the door jamb coincided with the crash that carried all three into a heap in the corner.

For a moment, the threshing Mexican and an armful of feminine flesh hampered Brad. Another blade lanced out of the confusion. Too late, Wilson's hand closed into a knotted fist. He wrenched himself aside, felt the sting of steel. Pain paralyzed him for an instant; then came a smack like a maul driving home a post oak.

Lights out!

Brad, shirt drenched with blood, gained his feet just as the blonde girl, a jump ahead of him, landed at the fireplace and seized a pair of tongs.

"Wait a minute, ma'am!" protested Wilson, kicking aside the knife that had glanced from a rib instead of transfixing him. "I ain't aiming tuh hurt yuh—"

"I know you aren't," she panted. "I was fixing to brain that saddle faced ruffian."

AND then she realized that Wilson's eyes were popping out like saddle pegs as he viewed the scenery her assailant had not had a fair chance to see.

She scrambled for the upper edges of her negligee, hiding the firm white hemispheres that had nearly cost Brad's life.

"M'am," said Brad, pretending he hadn't seen a thing, "now that yore sort of hobbled and kain't git away, I'll build me a cigarette whilst yo're gitting fixed up."

As he fumbled with his tobacco, Brad learned that Gwenn Barry had come from Nashville to take

charge of her deceased uncle's ranch up near Taos.

"But when I arrived, I learned he'd been dry gulched by a gang of rustlers. I didn't feel equal to a cattle war, so I came to El Paso to try to sell the Bar B to an old friend of Uncle's. At any price at all. But he wasn't in town, and while I was waiting, my room was looted and nearly every cent I had was stolen.

"Then this Mexican vermin—Gasper Oviedo—wanted me to sing in a *cantina*. He must have known I needed money, and needed it badly. The chances are he was the thief."

Now that it was over, the reaction had left her on the verge of tears. As she swayed dizzly, Wilson caught her in his arms. She clung to him, sobbing and trembling; and Brad, though not hysterical, was equally upset. He didn't know which hand was tingling the most: the one that stroked her gold bronze curls or the one which traced the sensuous sweeping curve from her shoulder to her waist. And the roundness of her thighs, the flattening of her breasts against him all combined to make him feel as though he swallowed a prairie fire.

Almost anything might have happened; but a stirring in the corner shocked Gwenn back to reality. She cried out. Wilson whirled. Oviedo was on his knees. One side of his face looked as though he had piled headfirst into a hornet's nest, but he had retrieved his knife.

The Mexican, however, had not a chance. The hammering had left him groggy. Before he knew what had happened, Wilson had him by the collar.

"Git out! An' stay out, or I'll squash yuh flatterin' a *tortilla!*"

The crash and the tinkle out in the hall indicated that Oviedo and his knife had landed simultaneously.

"Oh, you're hurt!" cried Gwenn as Wilson turned toward her, and she for the first time noticed his reddened shirt front.

"Shucks, that ain't nuthin'!" he reassured her. "But I done got yore negli-jee all messed up from it."

"As if I care!"

"Then I'm mussin' it up some more!" declared Wilson, determined not to waste any time bandaging superficial scratches. "Jest like I was sayin'—"

"Darling, you weren't *saying* anything," she murmured, arms closing about him.

But that shattered door was awkward; so they discussed her uncle's ranch up near Taos. Instead of selling out, Gwenn decided that with a reliable foreman like Wilson, she could hold her own against the rustlers.

"An' now that that's decided," said Brad, accepting the job, "I jest now remember the door of *my* room ain't busted down—"

"Darling, you're awfully clever," she sighed. "There's so much we have to talk about before we ride to Taos . . ."

BUT they didn't ride; they drove out of El Paso, two days later, long before sunrise. Instead of a horse for Gwenn, Wilson had picked up a pair of fuzztails and a decrepit buckboard to haul the

camp equipment and her luggage.

"Brad," she murmured, snuggling close to him, "it was sweet of you to sacrifice your own horse and saddle to get this outfit. I'm afraid I'd never have been equal to riding all the way to Taos."

There was little risk in driving through Las Cruces. No one would be interested in looking for the slayer of a tinhorn gambler. The death of Hillis was ancient history.

And then, far off to the right, Brad saw a fleeting glint of metal; a rifle barrel, for an instant picked out by the first hint of dawn. But for his momentary qualm about heading for Las Cruces, he would never have noticed that betraying flicker in the murky dust haze of the pass.

"Honey," he said, shifting the hand whose caress had made her shiver and catch her breath, "you better scrunch down. They's somethin' odd, up there ahead of us."

He reached for his Winchester, laid it across his knee.

They drove on, Brad carelessly slumped in the seat, Gwenn huddled at his feet. The distance was still long for shooting in that half-darkness. Though he faced straight ahead, from the corner of his eye he watched the foliage at the craggy pass.

A man shoots from ambush because of fear; and that man, Wilson gambled, would fire as soon as he thought he had half a target. But his lips became dry, and sweat cropped out on his face as he deliberately waited, knowing that at any instant hot lead might find him.

And then Wilson pitched from the seat, thudding heavily to the ground. He lay there, twitching in the dust as the mustangs bolted at the smack of the rifle shot that echoed an instant later. But Gwenn's scream was blotted out by the roar of Wilson's Winchester.

He had fired just as the dry gulcher, assuming that his victim was dead, had too hastily emerged from cover. The lurker pitched end for end all the way down the steep slope.

"That'll learn 'em somethin'," he chuckled, levering home another cartridge as he slid to the shelter of a boulder.

The sluggish fuzz-tails had subsided to a walk. Gwenn was safe; and as the amazed bushwhackers answered his fire, Wilson replied, raking the shadows with slugs directed at the flashes.

"Get the girl!" yelled a familiar voice. "Queek—watch her—"

Oviedo was directing the show from cover. Too late, Wilson realized that the attack was directed against Gwenn; that it was not reprisal for having smoked out Maude Hillis' side kick.

Two of the dry gulchers had leaped to the buckboard. The light was better now, and he could clearly see Gwenn, skirt and blouse half torn from her, bare legs and torso white in the morning grayness, as she struggled with her dry gulching assailants.

The mustangs wheeled sharply. The buckboard tipped, spilling the trio to the earth; and then, as another of the bushwhackers bounded from cover to check the horses, Brad found a target he could touch without danger to the girl.

THE crackle of the Winchester for a moment drowned the yells of Oviedo and his men. One dropped, drilled through, and released the bridles of the two fuzztails. Wilson, bounding forward, discarded his rifle and drew his hog-legs. He hosed the rocks and shrubbery, not trying to pick a target.

His strategy was sound. Lead and flying chips of rock would keep the enemy ducking until he could close in. But half way to his goal, he tripped. Oviedo, now almost above him, fired from the slope. Wilson whirled, but before he could squeeze lead, a dislodged rock hurtled down the incline, bounced, and struck his head a glancing blow.

He did not know whether the ensuing flame of red was sunrise or a bullet tearing off the top of his skull. And when Wilson finally stirred and opened his eyes, the pass was baking under the heat of forenoon. A vulture was circling high overhead.

Otherwise the cleft in the mountains was deserted. His Stetson, crushed and cut, had absorbed just enough of the glancing blow to keep him from being brained. And in the dim light Oviedo had assumed he was already vulture bait.

They had fled without going through his pockets or taking his guns. Circling around to "cut sign," Brad presently learned that Oviedo had headed back toward El Paso. Then he found his first real clue: a revolver whose regular hammer screw has been replaced by a pin-headed spindle. Such an arrangement was comparatively rare. Instead of wearing a scabbard, the owner of the gun had a special belt to which was stitched a slotted metal plate into which the hammer-pin would fit, allowing the weapon to swivel into line, with no motion lost in drawing.

Great for a gambler, or for murder at close quarters. It indicated a professional; and if El Paso's leading manufacturer of lead slinger's pistol harness hadn't made it, he would be able to guess which of his few competitors had.

Old Cap Finley ought to know.

"That'd be more certain than a description of Oviedo," reasoned Wilson, setting out to hoof it to town. "Gives me a chanct of larnin' whose top gunhand I plugged this mornin', and what jasper sent these buzzards tuh git Gwenn."

HOURS later, he was at the tiny shop of white haired Cap Finley, who for years had been consulting expert to outstanding gunslingers. The sharp eyed old man hefted the weapon, spat disgustedly.

"Son," he said, "this'n's one of a batch of three swivel guns I fixed up fer Slick Dargan's gun toters, an' fer onct I'm glad tuh hear a customer got his gizzard blown out.

"Gargan's been suspected of rustling white gals over tuh that hell hole he calls Molino del Rey, sort of as a special luxury. But onless yo're mighty handy with a gun yoreself, yuh ain't goin' tuh live through it."

And that was enough to send Brad Wilson across the river. Unless he hurried, Gwenn wouldn't him to find her. Not after that

border riff-raff got through with her . . .

MOLINO DEL REY was a blaze of lights, a blare of music, and a whirl of women whisked about the dance hall by swarthy *charros* in velvet and silver buttons; cowpokes from north of the line; grim lipped, hard eyed owl hooters.

Some of the *bailerinas* were white, others ranged golden brown to olive; but all were dressed the same: each wore a brilliant scarf which, caught at the shoulder, flared out as it draped crosswise to the opposite hip. A fold of silken shawl with a trailing fringe was full dress at the Molino; ear rings and gilded sandals completed the costume that gave the girls no chance to conceal money gleaned while dancing or hustling drinks.

Brad seated himself in a booth and called for liquor; but as he waited to pick a companion whom he might bribe or persuade to give him some word of Gwenn, he caught a glimpse of a tall, thin faced man whose long frock coat and diamond scarf pin and air of narrow scrutiny marked him as proprietor.

"Or maybe it ain't Slick Dargan," pondered Brad. "Jest the manager."

Gwenn wouldn't be on the floor so soon. First she'd be beaten, starved, and her spirit broken. Yet one face was familiar: Maude Hillis, slipping from the arms of a buckskin clad t r a p p e r, was swivel hipping toward an adjacent booth. Before he could retreat, she had caught his eye.

There was no evading recognition. Her smile was twisted and bitter as her hazel eyes; then she turned to wheedle a drink from her companion. Brad, still watching her lithe body undulate toward the booth next to his, felt a touch at his arm, and pressure against his hip.

He whirled, pistol hammer clicking as his weapon cleared its holster; but it was a woman's soft flesh that the muzzle prodded.

"Don't never sneak up on no one!" he reproved, sheathing the gun. "I damn nigh poured it to yuh!"!

But she laughed, and sultry dark eyes looked up into his own. Her olive tinted breasts peeped temptingly from their frail concealment, and he felt the rippling muscles of her thigh brush him as she snuggled closer, lips a crimson invitation.

"You buy me wan dreenk?" she queried, slim fingers stroking his cheek. "Or w'y not go w'ere we can talk in private, yes?"

Her name was D o l o r e s, he learned as his blood warmed from the hell in her eyes. Her lips were full and generous. They might be kissed to a smile less professional; and maybe she'd talk.

"M'am, who's that dignified lookin' gent with eyes like a rattle snake?" he whispered, indicating the frock coated man at the bar.

"That? Oh, that ees the boss. Sleek Dargan, that rat w'at steal all my extra money!"

With such sentiments, Dolores would be a valuable ally. And Maude Hillis, who did not know his reason for coming to Juarez, could not betray him. Neither was she in any position to have a per-

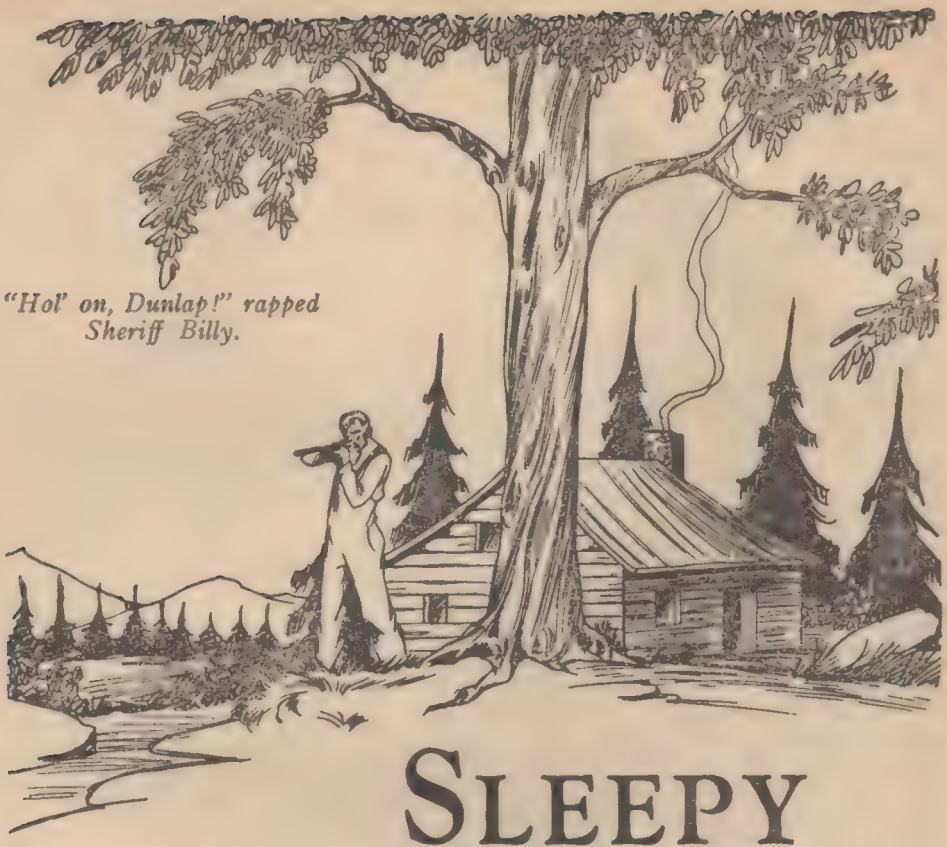
(Continued on page 112)

"WHEN folks on Sleepy Mountain pay up their rightful taxes, watch the whites of their eyes."

Sheriff Billy West conned over this Trianca County saying in his mind. He was writing out a tax receipt on the horn of his saddle. His tongue was in his cheek, his revolver was hitched up close to his right hand, and his eyes cornered upon a dozen assorted Wilkinses in the corn planted clearing.

For old Sam Wilkins had just paid up his back taxes, amounting to $47.55 in good folding money and silver. And old Sam hadn't uttered ary a cuss word in protest. It was plumb contrary to the nature of Sleepy Mountain folks.

All of the Wilkins menfolks present were long-geared, slack-jawed



"Hol' on, Dunlap!" rapped Sheriff Billy.

SLEEPY MOUNTAIN LAW

By CAL SPRAGUE

"Reckon I'm the only Sheriff that's ever c'lected Sleepy Mountain taxes an' a shotgun weddin' for int'rest on the same," Sheriff Billy said. But he had to use more than a gun!

and dangerous to a flatlander, especially a lawman. Their women folks present were skinny specimens, with snuff sticks protruding from blackened lips.

Sheriff Billy handed old Sam his tax receipt, and said, "It's right agreeable to find all-a you folks prosperin' an' willin' to support the law."

"Yup," spat out old Sam. "Maybe we're prosperin' an' maybe we ain't, an' maybe we're willin' an' maybe we ain't."

Sheriff Billy's hand stayed close to his gun. He counted five long, squirrel rifles showing among the Wilkinses. It wouldn't be good squirrel shooting until the fall frost.

Sheriff Billy was thinking of his four predecessors in office, this being his first year. The other four sheriffs had lasted less than a year each. Two had been voted out of office because they had failed to collect the twelve hundred in taxes due from Sleepy Mountain.

The other two sheriffs had collected most of the taxes, and Sleepy Mountain folks had their receipts to show for it. But these two lawmen had "accidentally" got themselves between the muzzles of squirrel rifles and the frolicking squirrels at which unnamed Sleep Mountaineers had been shooting.

In making this regrettable and highly mortal mistake, the two suddenly demised sheriffs had somehow lost the tax money it seemed they must have collected. But the Sleepy Mountain folks hadn't been careless enough to lose their receipts, even if they were a mite slipshod in their shooting at squirrels.

Sheriff Billy straightened his slim, light figure in the deep kak. He was starting to rein his bay gelding around, bound next for old Jim Dunlap's place. Dunlap was a hillbilly cowman and Sheriff Billy had been warned he would be extra hard to convince that he owed the county a red cent.

Then Sheriff Billy held up his horse. The hill girl his keen, blue eyes alighted upon wasn't anyways like the other slattern womenfolks. True, she had on a faded pair of overalls, but the way she filled them out in all the right places was downright fascinating to the eye and disconcerting to a man's soul.

Sheriff Billy caught the glint of bright eyes peering at him from a tousle of dark reddish hair. The girl's head was thrown back, as if she scorned the law, all lawmen and this one above all others. And as Sheriff Billy grinned at her a little, she tossed her tousled head, turned and went over a split rail fence as lightly as a deer might have jumped it.

THE GIRL'S quick movement was misfortunate for her. One thin overall leg was caught by a rail splinter. Her graceful flight became as confused as if she had been tossed by a bucking bronc. Her overalls ripped clear up to her waist. The nigh leg that Sheriff Billy saw all the way from the slender ankle to the dainty white things far up on a perfectly rounded thigh took his mind off the serious matter of the law. He chuckled as he saw the girl wasn't hurt and had leaped to her feet.

Her red mouth opened, and she was so close that Sheriff Billy almost saw sparks coming from her eyes. Her tight bosom heaved.

"Laugh, damn' yuh!" she cried out. "Lowdown flatlander, yuh'll be laughin' tuther side o' yore face, 'fore you git ary taxes out'n gran' pap!"

She whirled. There was a flash of the white leg, the mere contours of which left Sheriff Billy speechless. Then she was gone, running swiftly through waist-high corn.

"One o' your folks, Sam?" said Sheriff Billy.

"Nope," said Sam Wilkins surlily. "Jim Dunlap's gran'datter! Reckon if yuh're smart yuh'll pass up Dunlap's place! That Sally's

a hell whizzer, an' if she rousts up the Ruckers 'gainst yuh, they'll be needin' a new feller to do the sheriffin'!"

Sheriff Billy knew the Ruckers as the most dangerous breed of all the hillbilly cowmen and distillers of Sleepy Mountain co'n likker. He only grinned.

"Reckon it'll hafta come to a showdown with the Ruckers sooner or later, an' I'd prefer it sooner," he said with a lightness he didn't feel, roweling the bay gelding out of the Wilkinses' clearing.

SHERIFF BILLY wasn't of a mind to pass up old Jim Dunlap. He was more minded to ride there now than he had been.

"Seen quite a few nice fashioned fillies here an' there," he mused aloud. "But I ain't ever seen one even among the dancin' gals at Singin' Springs that could hold a candle to this'n when it comes to looks an' legs."

He rode slowly, watchfully, along a winding trail toward the Dunlap clearing and cabin. It was his first day collecting the long disputed taxes from the cantankerous Sleepy Mountaineers. And he was troubled and suspicious, not because of opposition he had expected, but by the lack of it.

"Suthin' haywire," he muttered. "Here it ain't much more'n noon, an' I've rounded up better'n four hund'ed with no argufyin'. Reckon I'd best be keepin' an eye out for squirrels, so's not to get betwixt one o' them an' a dose o' lead pizen."

It was dark shadowed under the trees in a narrow lane. He saw blue smoke curling from a stick-and-mud chimney. That was the Dunlap cabin. Then his bay gelding shied suddenly.

Sheriff Billy had his fingers gripping his .45 as he brought the horse down to all fours. He saw the glint of metal near an oak tree at one side. He didn't have to look twice to identify a long squirrel rifle barrel sticking out past the tree.

"Whoa, Nudger!" he said loudly to his horse. "Dangnation! Since when are you bein' spooked by garter snakes!"

He was maneuvering the horse around, pretending he had not seen the ominous rifle barrel. His idea was to drop off behind the beast and put himself into position where he could at least save himself from being dry gulched.

A clear, hard little voice changed his ideas.

"Git off, damn' yuh, 'fore I let yuh have it! Yuh ain't ridin' no further, an' yuh're shaggin' it on yore two legs off'n Sleepy Mountain!"

For all of its hardness and its hillbilly lingo, Sheriff Billy decided he had never heard a more musical voice. Anyway, a wave of relief swept over him. The eye behind the rifle sights might have belonged to a Rucker, but the voice was only that of Jim Dunlap's hell whizzer of a grandchild. Sheriff Billy slid off his horse.

"Slap the hoss's rump an' start 'im tailin' for home!" commanded the hell whizzer behind the rifle. "An' then you can git shaggin'! My gran'pap's been ailin' an' cain't pay taxes!"

Sheriff Billy's vision was quick. He saw the girl's eyes shining back

of the long, heavy gun. He noted that the weight of the Kentucky made barrel was too hefty for the small hands, and that the girl was resting the weapon upon a single strand of barbed wire between the trees, that served as the only cow fence along here.

NOW SHERIFF BILLY wasn't honing to be shagged off the mountain by any sprig of a girl, even if she was a hell whizzer. Contrariwise, he was convinced she would shoot. He gave that much to having laughed when she had fallen off the fence.

"I 'low I'd best palaver this tax chore with your gran'pap," he said mildly. "So let's go up to the cabin—"

"Stay whar yuh are!" snapped the girl. "Yuh do as I'm sayin' or I'll sure 'nough let yuh—"

Acting upon the presumption that her mind was on her talking, Sheriff Billy blurred into action. Instead of ducking away from the rifle resting upon the wire, he threw himself toward it and down. One booted foot whipped up and kicked the barbed strand as the long gun whoomed smoke and lead.

The blast fanned Sheriff Billy's hair, but the kicked wire whanged upward and threw the rifle out of line. Sheriff Billy went under the exploding weapon in a sliding dive. His lanky arms enwrapped the girl's overalled legs.

They went down in a tumbling confusion of the girl's kicking feet and Sheriff Billy's effort to secure a less intimate hold. But Sally Dunlap's hands clawed off his Stetson and twisted into his hair, nails feeling for his eyes.

It appeared that Sally had hastily pinned her torn overall legs together. The pins flew out. Sheriff Billy suddenly felt like the one time in his life he had drawn to a royal flush, only a heap more so. The white flesh of the girl's thigh was like sun-warmed silk under one hand.

His fingers tingled when they touched the lacy white of her under things as they rolled over and over. His hands being thus engaged, holding the soft, lithe figure, he saw the round, cherry-red mouth open for what he believed might be a scream for help.

He wasn't so sure that the woods wouldn't be full of law feuding Ruckers with their deadly rifles. There was but one way that he could cut off that scream. His mouth clamped over the rounded red lips.

Now Sheriff Billy had kissed womenkind here and there and elsewhere. He had kissed them and held them in his arms when they were willing, and when they were not so willing, but even the not so willing ones had not set his pulses racing like this.

It may have been because Sheriff Billy was clean shaved, and his kiss had that overpowering something that always got his woman, sooner or later, which made it different from the rough bearded caress of any Sleepy Mountaineer. Or it may have been really the first time Sally, the hell whizzer, had ever been kissed; anyway, her small hands abruptly ceased clawing and the convulsive kicking of her sweetly fashioned legs subsided to a trembling compliance with his hold upon them.

He wasn't worried about taxes . . . when suddenly a voice rang out—"Drop that girl, yuh yellow-livered flatlander!"

Sheriff Billy realized grimly that his kiss was being returned with interest, and that probably this was only a reaction against the girl's will. But the soft, quivering body was for a few seconds moulded to his own, and Sheriff Billy wasn't caring a damn about collecting taxes.

WHEN Sally's hands quit twisting his hair and slipped down to the back of his neck, the time and place scarcely being propitious, Sheriff Billy dallied his kiss and made a move to set the girl upon her feet. And just as he did, a cracked voice came from the direction of the Dunlap cabin.

"Drap that gal, yuh yeller-livered flatlander 'fore I ventilate yore gizzard!"

Sheriff Billy thought of the Ruckers and could almost feel lead chewing into his back as he released Sally and scrambled to his fee. He saw bent, old Jim Dunlap limping rapidly down a path from the cabin.

Old Jim was steadying an army musket, aimed full at the hated lawman. Sheriff Billy instantly saw his mistake in disentangling himself from the girl, for old Jim halted and the gun hammer made a clicking as it was cocked.

"Hol' on, Dunlap!" rapped out Sheriff Billy. "You seen suthin' that ain't nowise meanin' what you think!"

Even as he said it, Sheriff Billy was not so sure he was telling the truth, but a musket load of buckshot could play hell and all with a man's inards. And it looked as if he would get the full blast of the gun, whether or no.

Old Jim Dunlap's thinly bearded face was twisted with anger. He wasn't doing any argufying except with his trigger finger. Sheriff Billy moved to drop flat, in the hope of missing some of the buckshot.

The musket made smoky thunder, but as it did, old Jim's mouth opened in a yell and he jumped as if he had been stung. The load of shot whistled upward through the oak branches. Old Jim dropped the musket and fell down, one bony hand grabbing at his overalled leg.

"Gran'pap!" cried out Sally. "What's it? Copperhead!"

Now a mountain copperhead is a lowdown, sneaky snake that hits without the warning buzz of a rattler, and it's twice as poisonous. Sheriff Billy was beside old Jim in two long jumps. He kicked the writhing snake to death as the old man groaned and tore his overalls away from the wound. Sally cried out.

"Gran'pap! Wott'll we do? Gran'pap!"

All the hell had suddenly gone out of Sally, the hell whizzer. But there was still a bitter note in her voice.

"Yuh might as well git ridin', flatlander," she said to Sheriff Billy. "Yuh cain't c'lect yore taxes now."

Sheriff Billy snapped out, "Get water boil'n' fast, Sally!"

She stood staring for half a minute. The hated lawman was on his knees and his knife was in his hand. He was making a swift incision around the two dark spots on old Jim's leg.

Sally shuddered as blood spurted. Sheriff Billy lifted out a circular cut of flesh. Then he was bending down, his clean lips that had kissed her against her will applied to the snake bite.

Sheriff Billy was doing two things at once. He was sucking the poison from the wound, and he was using his hands to twist his own ripped-off galluses in a tourniquet around old Jim's leg above the bite.

Sally turned, sobbed, and ran toward the house. Even then, Sheriff Billy couldn't miss the once more exposed whiteness of her tempting contours.

OLD JIM DUNLAP was resting on a shake-down cot. Sheriff Billy said, "Maybe so your gran'pap wasn't ailin', as you said, but he's sure 'nough liable to be laid up quite a spell now. We'll talk about them taxes next time."

Sally's brown eyes were wide upon him. She put her hands upon his shoulders and she kissed him willingly enough.

"I ain't keerin', even if yuh did laugh at me," she said softly. "Go on with yore c'lectin'. An' look out for the Ruckers. They're out to git yuh, but maybe so I kin hol' 'em off."

"Nev' mind, Sally," said Sheriff Billy. "I'll be ridin' back."

As he rode away, he guessed maybe it was snake poison that made him dizzy. Or it might have

been the long swigs of old Jim's co'n likker he had taken. Anyway, he took another swig from a jug that Sally had put on his saddle horn, just in case it might be the snake poison.

"Nev' thought I'd be looped in by a hillbilly gal," he muttered thickly. "But I'm comin' back to c'lect, Sally, an' it won't be taxes."

What with more swigging of co'n likker and his thinking of Sally, Sheriff Billy forgot his troubled suspicion as another two hundred in tax money was easily added to the four hundred. He had six hundred odd dollars in Sleepy Mountain dinero when he made the Sleepy Mountain House just after dark and put up his horse.

Sheriff Billy felt dizzier than ever after he'd had a steak. He went in and stopped in front of the worn desk of the mountain hotel. Lem Moran, a long-jointed, bead-eyed clerk, eyed him.

"Find collectin' ruther pore, didn't yuh?" said Lem Moran with a hard grin.

"Nope," said Sheriff Billy, digging into his pants pocket. "Lem, here's six hund'ed in foldin' money you can put in the safe tonight."

Lem's beady eyes became smaller as he saw the money. But he put the soiled bills in the safe and suggested they have a drink at the bar. Sheriff Billy was not sure just when he left the bar.

Shortly after he went up to bed, he would have been interested if he had seen a gaunted, hard-eyed hillbilly come into the hotel. This bearded mountaineer called Lem Moran from behind the desk. They held a confab in low tones.

SHERIFF BILLY had the sun in his eyes and a hell awful taste in his mouth when he woke up. He groaned as he slapped cold water over his face. Then he felt in his pants pocket. He was several minutes dragging his memory to life out of his hangover.

"Yup," he said. "Left the tax dinero with Lem. That's it."

He went down and had three long drinks before he felt sure of making his breakfast stick. Then he went in and stepped up to the office desk, and said to Lem:

"I'll take that six hund'ed I left last night. Figger I'll round up the balance today, an' maybe so be ridin' down to Singin' Springs."

Lem Moran's beady eyes enlarged. He stared at Sheriff Billy.

"Wat yuh tryin' to do, run a ranny on me?" he said as if he was being greatly surprised. "If I ever saw that much dinero at once, I'd be plumb spooked."

Sheriff Billy's hand went instinctively to his gun. But he restrained his impulse to draw. What in all hell and high water was this? He couldn't have been that pie-eyed last night?

"C'mon, Lem!" he snapped. "Pass over the money! I've got some more c'lectin' to get done!"

Lem seemed to turn pale as he watched the sheriff's gun hand. But he shook his partly bald head mournfully.

"Sure is funny what drinkin' Sleepy Mountain dew does to a feller," he said sorrowfully. "Must've had yore imagination right stirred up. You didn't leave no six hund'ed with me, an' sides yuh owe yore bill."

"Meanin' —" Sheriff Billy

clamped his teeth together.

He figured fast. True, he had been pretty drunk, what with snake poison and co'n likker. And no doubt others of the Sleepy Mountain cowmen had seen him like that. He could start a ruction here and now, but perhaps that was what was wanted. His eyes took in the windows and he was sure he saw figures moving outside.

"Start something," was his thought, "and like as not I would be gunned down and it could be made to look like some kind of a holdup of Lem Moran. No. That won't work."

Sheriff Billy was sure that Lem Moran would never try running such a whizzer on him unless he was sided by others. Now he judged he knew why taxes had been so easy to collect. The hillbillies no doubt figured on having Lem Moran put away the dinero he turned in, then on getting it back.

Sheriff Billy made up his mind quickly. If he had to put up a fight for the tax money, he might as well have all of it in one pot.

"You'd best rec'lect about that six hund'ed by the time I come back tonight, Lem," he said harshly. "I'll be busy all day, an' if you've got a lick o' sense, you'll take the chance I'm givin' you to come clean."

As he climbed into the saddle for another day's work, his mind was busy. He was sure that a shooting had been wanted. Now that he had put it off, it would come to a showdown when he had more of the tax money.

"Might as well have a shootin' ruckus over all o' it, as only half," he mused out, loud. "An' I'm bettin' c'lectin' will be easy again today."

It was as he surmised. He had most of the other six hundred when he returned to the Sleepy Mountain House. But Sheriff Billy's mind still was sorely upset. He had not yet figured out a plan by which he could outsmart Lem Moran and the hillbillies he was sure were backing him.

Then, as he was putting up his horse, Sally Dunlap slipped from the shadows. She was wearing her Sunday dress. She put her hands on Sheriff Billy's shoulders.

A split second after his arms went around her, Sheriff Billy realized Sally was not burdened with skirts under the thin white gingham. Her knees pressed his muscled legs as she kissed him.

"I hadda ride down," she said softly. "I heered the Ruckers is headin' for the Sleepy Mountain house. Ain't wantin' yuh should be mistooken in lettin' 'em trick yuh into a gunnin'."

"An' you rode down 'cause I give your gran'pap some help, huh?" he quizzed.

"Ye-es—" Then, "No, I didn't, Sheriff Billy. I come all of my own mind 'cause—'caus—"

THERE in the shadows his arms held her tightly for a long minute. This would not do, not at all. He knew Sleepy Mountain folks. For a flatlander, especially a lawman, to be caught with one of their women was more than likely to be his quick finish.

Nevertheless, Sheriff Billy's brain was fired by the shenanigan that Lem Moran, sided by others, was trying to run on him. It gave

Sheriff Billy pushed her to one side and stepped in.

him an idea, his one way to outsmart the hillbillies.

"Sally, I'm tellin' you I love you," he said gravely. "An' I'm askin' you to marry me. It come all of a sudden, but I know my own mind. An' so's they won't be no argufyin' about it, I want you should go ridin' down to Singin' Springs with me."

Sally, the hell whizzer, had no words to her reply. But her parted lips and the quivering of her responsive body as she clung to him was an answer that went all the way down into his boots.

Sheriff Billy freed her after a couple of minutes.

"Come on with me, Sally honey," he said quietly. "Seein' it's this way, I'm honin' to keep on bein' sheriff o' Trianca County. An' remainin' sheriff depends on deliverin' Sleepy Mountain tax money to Singin' Springs."

"YUH want I should come into Mountain house with yuh, Sheriff Billy?" said Sally hesitatingly, as he held her arm and moved toward the old frame hotel.

"Not as you may be thinkin',

honey," he said. "Just want you should witness a little transaction, an' then wait outside for me a spell. I'll be ridin' you back to your gran'pap afterwards."

Sheriff Billy had it in mind now to get back his six hundred, which Lem Moran said he had never received. He grinned a little as Sally walked beside him. She was as pretty as a flower and her eyes were shining as she looked up to him.

Lem Moran's lantern jaw dropped when he saw Sheriff Billy escorting the hell whizzer of Sleepy Mountain. Here was something beyond his figuring. For Lem knew Sally as a friend of the feuding Ruckers and it had been hinted she would be moving to big Jake Rucker's cabin almost any time now.

With Sally beside him, Sheriff Billy dug down and produced a wad of soiled bills. He counted out six hundred dollars. Lem's little eyes were popping, and he was glancing furtively at the windows.

He looked as if he was trying to guess what sort of a ranny Sheriff Billy was trying to run on him.

"Maybe so I was too par'lyzed to know rightfully what I was doin' last night, Lem," said Sheriff Billy. "Might have mislaid that other money, but here's this six hund'ed for safekeeping. You saw me count the dinero, Sally?"

"Yeah," said Sally promptly. "It makes six hund'ed."

Lem swallowed hard, "An' yuh want I should keep it tonight for yuh?"

"That's c'rect," said Sheriff Billy, passing over the money. Lem Moran looked as if he was half dreaming as he opened the safe and placed the bills inside.

"I'm puttin' it away, an' it's your'n for the askin'," muttered Lem.

"Better be," said Sheriff Billy grimly, and walked away toward the outside door, with Sally's hand on his arm.

Outside, he said, "Now, honey, you be waitin' by the oak up there at the fork o' the road. I'll be along in 'bout half an hour."

She kissed him. Sheriff Billy went around the side way and into the hotel bar. He hoisted two long drinks. Some ten minutes after he had deposited his six hundred dollars, he was back before Lem Moran's desk.

"Say, Lem," he said shortly, "I've changed my mind. I'll be ridin' down early, so I'll keep the dinero in my room."

The color fled from Lem's sallow cheeks. He glanced around. If there were Ruckers about, they were not in evidence. Sheriff Billy guessed exactly what Lem was thinking.

Sally Dunlap was a witness to the passing of the second six hundred. He did not dare refuse to give it up. And Sheriff Billy was pretty sure Lem would have some explaining to do for falling down on his end of slicking the tax money out of the sheriff.

Lem passed the six hundred reluctantly across the desk.

"Much obliged, Lem," said Sheriff Billy, counting the roll carefully. "I'm hittin' the hay early."

He could see that Lem was itching to have him go, possibly so he could get word of what had hap-

pened to those who were siding him. Sheriff Billy planned to go to his room, then go out the back way and join Sally.

The rest of his plan depended upon quick action.

WHEN Sheriff Billy opened his room door, there was a soft flurry in the darkness. Sheriff Billy's hand dropped to his gun, but he had other use for it almost at once.

"Honey, I seen the Ruckers comin' an' I snuck up here," whispered Sally, her soft arms clinging to his neck. "If yuh still are of the same mind, we'd best be ridin' down."

Time was important. But so were the warm, moist lips suddenly pressed to his mouth. Once again Sheriff Billy felt like that time he had held a royal flush, only more so. . . .

SO IT was some minutes later when Sheriff Billy walked into the front door of the Sleepy Mountain house from the outside, with Sally holding his arm. Now there was a new light in those wide eyes, and a wonderful flush under the tanned skin of her pretty face.

Sheriff Billy suddenly pulled Sally to one side before two men at the hotel desk had seen them. Sheriff Billy identified the gangling figure of big Jake Rucker who was talking to Lem Moran. Big Jake had a squirrel rifle cradled in his left arm.

The voices carried across to the spot where Sheriff Billy had concealed himself quickly with Sally.

"Tell yuh I had to give 'im the second six hund'ed he put up," said the trembling voice of Lem. "Damnation! He had yore own gal as a witness to handin' it over. But I've got that other six hund'ed still. Wantin' I should give it to yuh?"

"Dammitall, no!" spat out Jake Rucker. "Hang onto it until I talk to the boys! We're gonna git all-a it back, an' we'll git that lowdown flatlander 'fore he hits Singin' Springs! I'll be back in a jiffy, an' they hain't no flatlander havin' truck with my gal an' livin' to tell it!"

"Please, Billy—please, let's go now," whispered Sally.

Sheriff Billy patted her trembling hand. "We're takin' what's rightfully our'n," he said quietly. "You heard Lem say he had that other six hund'ed. C'mon."

LEM MORAN'S Adam's Apple almost bopped his chin when he saw Sheriff Billy standing before him, with Sally Dunlap clinging to his arm.

"Thunk yuh was ridin' in a hurry," said Lem, his eyes roving to doors and windows.

"Nope," said Sheriff Billy cheerfully. "But I'll be thankin' you for the six hund'ed dollars I give you a short spell back. Me an' Sally are figurin' on bein' hitched by the justice 'fore we start for Singin' River."

Boots suddenly scuffled on the floor back by the door. Sheriff Billy cocked one eye that way. Big Jake Rucker and several other Ruckers were clumping in. Then Sheriff Billy saw old Jim Dunlap limping behind them, carrying his old musket, and with old Jim came

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Shotgun Sue

(Continued from page 17)

Starling cursed, sprang to the window, fired three times through the broken glass. Dancey sprang to the other side of the room, saw a dark figure behind a tree some fifty yards away and cut loose with his own six gun, ducking in time to dodge the return from at least three sources.

The battle raged for ten minutes, then died down. Suddenly from outside came a voice, "We got your punchers, Dancey, got 'em safe! You want to talk business to me now or do I take this outfit away from you?"

"I'll see you in hell, Santee," called Dancey and blazed away. Another ten minutes of intermittent fighting took place. Then Rosa was beside Dancey in the darkness.

"Ross is hit in the heel," she sobbed. "He wants to see you, Matt. Oh, Matt, they'll kill you, they'll kill you!"

A moment later in the darkness, Starling breathed, "So it's up to you to go for help, Dancey. I always keep a horse hid out, always knew a time like this would come. Go out the kitchen window and down toward that cottonwood grove. You'll find the horse there. Go into town and get a posse; maybe you'll get back in time."

Many people used to say Matt Dancey was like an Indian. He went through the kitchen window like a shadow—but he didn't go to the cottonwood grove. Instead he circled back by the ranch house, dead dark, and silent, went softly into the saddle house for a kak, roped a grey out of the corral and set off. But not for town. Things were beginning to take shape in Dancey's mind, things that didn't make sense. He headed away from town—on his way to see the dreaded Santee's ranch and stronghold.

He never made it.

THERE was a light in the cabin where he first had seen Sue. Friend—foe? He got off his horse, ground hitched, crept up slowly. It was Sue. She was seated, with her head in her hands at the table, staring directly at the door.

He stepped into the light. "Don't shoot," he said. She simply stared at him. "What are you doing here?"

She shrugged her shapely shoulders. "They got my job at the hotel. The sheriff ran me out of town. I hope you're satisfied, Mr. Hourglass."

Very softly he walked across and seated himself on the table. "We ain't getting no place at all," he said. He tried to put his hand beneath her chin. She slapped it aside wearily, her eyes filled with tears.

"Let me alone! I came back for a last look at the only home my brother and I ever knew!"

"Brother? Why, Rosa—!"

She curled her lip. "Rosa! You falling for that—that—" She was at a loss for words. "Jim Turner was my brother, Sue Turner is my name. Starling had Jim elked because Jim didn't scare like the rest

of the nesters. Starling wants the whole basin for his own—he's land hungry, power hungry."

Matt nodded slowly. "He said this Santee—?"

"What a laugh! Look, I'll show you what Starling's like. You were too busy making sport of me last week to notice. Look, damn you, this is Starling's work!"

Off came her shirt in one gesture, she turned the whiteness of her shapely back to him. Horrified, Matt gazed at the whip scars. "Masked, but we knew him. They had Jim tied up by the thumbs while they whipped me! Starling, damn you, Starling, not Santee!" He nodded. "Where are you going?"

"To see Starling," he called over his shoulder. "If you'll wait, I'll try to make some of this up to you!"

She cried out after him, but he didn't pause. He simply got on his horse and galloped back to the Hourglass. There was no firing, the house was lighted.

Rosa met him at the door. "They left," she cried, "and Shorty and Gus and Nig are out after them. Did you find the sheriff?"

He brushed her off. He said, "I didn't go for the horse in the cottonwoods, sister. The fact that I'm alive proves that. Where's Starling?"

He brushed her protests aside like her restraining hands, walked into the living room. He gazed at the bulldog man who sat beside the bottle. There was a towel around his foot. Dancey laughed. His hands were on his hips, the right close to his gun.

"Take off the towel, Starling. I'm wise. I know the whole thing!"

Starling smiled. He spoke softly, smoothly. "If you know the whole thing, you'll probably take the ten thousand. It's there on the table along with a bill of sale." He poured a drink. "Just what do you know, Dancey?"

"I know my brother was too busy to keep check on you. I know you're the big power in town, not Santee. I came down here a week ago and checked the basin—"

"And had a friend of yours wire that you were coming from El Paso." The big man nodded affably. "You were watched through glasses all the time you thought you were spying on me. I even had a man watching you in Sand River! What else do you know?"

"I know you're land hungry, that you've run legitimate squatters off open range, that you whipped Sue Turner and had her brother gulched! I know you spurred my horse into what you thought was an ambush tonight, that you had the Chinaman pin the note on the door, that your own cowboys were the supposed Santee men in the attack. You'd have gulched me down in the cottonwoods where you wanted me to go for the horse! I know—!"

"You know you're going to sign that bill of sale and take that money! I'm a fine fellow to even give you the dough! Don't touch that gun. There's been a cocked shotgun on you ever since you stalked in. Come in boys."

There were the three of them, Gus, Nig, and Shorty, as evil an appearing trio of cowboys as Matt had ever seen. One of them lifted Dancey's gun, another pushed him

into a chair at the table. The one named Nig took out a knife, thrust the point into Dancey's arm. "Sign it, mister."

Dancey's face went bleak, his eyes cold. Starling leaned back his chair and laughed. He said, "This guy is pretty hard, Nig. I got a better idea. Bring in the girl, Shorty."

Rosa screamed, she kicked, she fought, as Shorty and Gus dragged her into the room. By now Nig had handed the knife to Starling himself, had buried the muzzle of a six gun in Dancey's kidney! They stretched the screaming woman on the table before Dancey's narrowed eyes. The knife flashed, the shirt was cut half away from her trembling breasts.

Starling grinned. "Now, Dancey, maybe you can take it yourself, but no man could sit there and see a woman he's held in his arms cut to pieces. Pick up that pen and begin—or should I start first?"

"Don't let him hurt me, don't let him! Take the money, let's get away!"

"Go ahead," said Dancey calmly. "Whittle hell out of her!"

Starling almost dropped the knife. His eyes bored into Dancey's. Softly he said, "You know, eh?"

Dancey laughed—but the laugh wasn't nice. "I'm no fool. I could see she was faking right from the start. With the sun behind the hotel, it couldn't very well glint on a rifle barrel, could it? And besides, rifle barrels are blued, they don't glint. She was faking right along, I knew it. Go on, whittle on her!"

A STREAM of foul curses came from the woman's lips. She struggled to sit erect and Starling's hand held her down! He was like a mad man, his smile like the grin of a wolf. He said, "I'm a little tired of Rosa anyway, Dancey. If you think I won't cut hell out of her—watch this!"

There was no fake to the scream now, there was no acting in Rosa's horror, in the reality of her struggle. The knife bit into soft flesh, tender flesh, blue veined flesh, and red worms of blood crawled over satin skin.

A gun boomed. Nig bellowed, flew against the wall, the gun dropping from his hand. A voice said sonorously, "Hold very still, gentlemen, very still indeed!"

And into the rooms stepped one of the tallest men that Dancey had ever seen. He was cadaverous, he wore a long frock coat, a black shirt and a reversed collar. He said, "Them that live by the sword shall die by the sword. I hope you move, Starling!"

Dancey got a glimpse of Sue Turner standing behind the newcomer with the shotgun in her hands. Dancey grinned cheerfully, and dived over the table toward Starling.

THEY still talk of that fight in the Hourglass country. How one hundred seventy pounds of wildcat went against two hundred twenty pounds of lion—and the lion had a knife. Afterward, when Dancey arose from the bloody mass that was once the lion, he turned to find Sue gazing at him with starlit eyes, the cowboys safe-

ly roped, and the sullen Rosa roped with them.

Sue came to his arms. After he had kissed her, he said, "Who's this, honey, this fighting preacher?"

She giggled. "That's Black Santee, owner of the Seven-Up horse ranch!"

"Black Santee! I thought—?"

Santee raised a big hand. "Brother," he said grimly, "I heard all about it. I figger I been a little too wrapped up in God's work and not enough in my own. I let my ranch run down the past few years while I spread the gospel. Now I have more work—the cleaning out of the town, controlled by that carrion!"

He pointed dramatically at Starling.

"You boys aren't tied too tight to pick up your boss. Let the dead man stay where he is!"

As they picked up the groaning Starling, the man who wanted the entire basin, Matt whispered, "Golly, honey, I didn't expect you to go for help. I didn't expect you to help me at all. Not after what I did!" She questioned him. "Playing mortally wounded and—and—kissing you like that!"

She only giggled. "I tried to shoot you through the door because I thought Starling had sent you. But do you know why I shot at you the second time?"

He held her close. "Because I kissed you?"

"Because you said you shouldn't have done it!"

So he kissed her again.

She Herded Him Around

(Continued from page 29)

buttes whose gold was making Brand Thorman rich. He reasoned, "Now that Anne ain't got no use for me, Thorman won't be refusing me a job outa spite."

Gold he had come for and gold he was getting.

Presently, he heard the wheeze of a steam engine, the pounding of the ten-stamp mill. But he could not see any miners. There were no ore cars coming out of the black tunnel to feed the mill; no ore cars took useless rock to the dump. All Grimes knew about mining could have been written on a postage stamp, but even so, he felt that there should have been more activity than that thump-thump-wheeze.

He might never have thought of ore cars had he not seen three of them on the rusting rails, up there along the butte's eroded side.

Then there was activity aplenty. That puff of vapor from the engine house might have been steam, but just on the off chance, Grimes piled out of the saddle. Two seconds later, a slug buzzed past. He heard the rumble of the gun. As he clawed dirt, he muttered, "Either that coyote's shooting a cannon, or they jest fired a blast in the mine."

A second shot kept Grimes from taking his horse to a sheltering dip. The animal toppled over, kicking. A third shot from the buffalo gun drove the rider scram-

bling for cover. He pitched and rolled. Then, minutes later, he took off his hat, held it well to one side, and cautiously crept toward the lip.

A .55 caliber slug drilled the Stetson. He tried to crawl in the opposite direction to reach an arroyo that seamed the mesa. A slug fanned his ear. Grimes' Colts were outranged by a good 600 yards. He was bottled up. He could not get at the canteen hooked on the saddle.

The sun was beating down. Horn toads raced among the hot rocks. Grimes' mouth became dry; his lips cracked in the searing wind. He began to doubt that anyone could get a job at the New Golconda.

At hourly intervals during the blasting afternoon, Grimes tried to creep to the arroyo. The final attempt cured him. Another quarter inch, and he'd have had both lungs torn out by a 550 grain slug. Brand Thorman wanted to make sure that snoopers didn't return with reports on the lay of the land.

The sun was low, and Grimes was fairly perishing of thirst. Little whirlwinds blinded him with dust and burrs. The whole mesa danced crazily. He took some mesquite sticks, tore his shirt into strings; he peeled out of his coat and pants.

"I'm getting into that mine if it takes till Judgment Day," he mumbled as he set to work. "Mebbe I ain't working there, but I'm getting a look and I'm getting a nugget."

He made a dummy of mesquite branches tied together. He dressed it, and put his hat on the dummy. Then, crawling on his belly, he caught a wooden "ankle" in each hand and made the scarecrow simulate cautious peeping.

No one fired. He wondered if the watcher was looking. He tried again, making the dummy pop up once more, a little nearer the point where a man might make a dash for the arroyo's protection. Grimes reasoned that a man who had baked in that deadly heat all day would not have patience to wait until dark; he might be too crazy with the heat. Indeed, Grimes was practically that, or he would have let well enough alone.

Once more he managed to put his double up to spying.

The dummy jerked. An ounce slug had smacked it between the shoulders. A big puff of dust rose. Grimes lay there, flat on his face, the scarecrow just ahead of him. From the mine, it must have looked like that final, perfect shot. Mirage, and sunset haze had kept the sniper from seeing that he had plugged a dummy.

PATIENTLY, Grimes waited for darkness. Then he went to his dead horse to get his canteen. The hot water tasted better than any beer.

Once in the arroyo, he headed upgrade, toward the now silent stamp mill. Lights gleamed in the buildings. As he came nearer, he could hear voices; there was laughter, some feminine, some masculine, and all drunken.

A foghorn voice bawled,

"Three gals came down
from Canada,
Drinking rum and wine,

The subject of conversation was,
Your hair ain't as red as mine—"

It was the chorus that shocked Grimes. He muttered, "They sure weren't ladies," and picked his way up the grade. Soon he was at the narrow gauge line for ore cars.

He got a look through a crack in the nearest shack. Four miners were paralyzed, and one was nodding, and one was bawling another verse of the song. The second case of whiskey was open, and the half dozen girls had most of their garments scattered all over the tangle of bottles and tin plates and pack saddles. One was doing a dance that fascinated Grimes.

"Gosh, I never knowed a gal could wobble in so many places at onct."

The nodding miner prodded her hip with a cigarette butt. She cried, *"Chinga'o borrego!"* and smacked his mustache. He toppled over. The song went on. So did Grimes. But the life of a miner sure did have its high spots.

The other lighted shack was new. The lumber had not yet turned gray in the blistering sun. The narrow gauge tracks ran right into the building; it had apparently been whacked up with no regard to ore cars. That was odd. But not half as odd as what went on in the large room.

There were three-decked bunks, horse gear, a sheet iron stove. Three men sat on packing cases; Brand Thorman sat on a solid oaken chest with a shattered lock whose express company seals still hung from wires. The fifth man knelt before a little crucible under which there was a charcoal fire; sparks flew as he pumped goatskin bellows and sweated in the red glare.

There was a box of black sand in which ingots cooled; there was a depression in the sand, ready for the next crucible of melted gold. The man with the bellows said, "Dump in a bit more, Brand."

Thorman straightened up, took a double handful of coins out of the chest and dumped them into the crucible. By then Grimes understood the whole game. One of the gang was familiar; he had taken part in the stage robbery.

No wonder Thorman kept his gang of miners dead drunk, and did not want strangers prowling around! The miners and the stamp mill were to fool the natives of Broken Axe. The mine was a fake; a hideout for bandits to melt down stolen coin and palm it off as gold from a lost lode. Thorman was sinking the bank, and then offering to ante in enough to save Jim Parsell, marry Anne, and also get control of the bank. Simple as pouring sand out of a boot!

These men were sober and armed. Even for a surprise party, five to one was too much to bite off. Grimes retreated up the rusty tracks. Fifty yards upgrade, he came to an ore car. He released the brake, and heaved to free the rusty axle. It squealed. The car began to roll. Grimes vaulted into the steel shell. Creaking and groaning, the car picked up speed.

The clump and clatter warned the gang a little too soon. Two men dashed out, guns blazing. Slugs

zinged from the sides of the car. Grimes rose, a Colt in each hand. Light from inside the house silhouetted the gunners. One doubled up; and rolled down the grade. The other stumbled.

Brand Thorman's buffalo gun cut loose from the window. Grimes, however, was already ducking. The next instant, the car ploughed into the cabin. A lantern smashed. The crucible and furnace tipped over. It was the oaken chest that derailed the ore car. Guns laced the murky glare. Slugs smacked and screamed; Grimes came up, shooting, but two men escaped.

Horses clattered down the grade. The wrecked cabin began to blaze. The drunken miner and one of the Mexican girls still sang, *"Three gals came down from Canada, drinking rum and wine. . . ."*

Brand Thorman and one accomplice had escaped. Grimes thrust his guns into his leather-lined hip pockets and bounded toward the tunnel where the horses had been stabled. He lost time catching a saddled nag; the fugitives had stampeded the dead men's animals. When he set out, he could no longer hear the pounding of hooves across the mesa. But he quirted a dead man's mount toward Broken Axe.

Thorman couldn't leave Broken Axe. Thorman could scarcely suspect the identity of the snooper; neither could he double back to recover the unmelted coins from the blazing shack. So Grimes galloped on.

HE DISMOUNTED in front of the Thorman House Bar. None of the horses at the hitching rack were blowing or sweating. He was sure that Brand Thorman had come down a side alley, and gone either to some bar or to his quarters in the hotel he owned. Grimes poked his head into several saloons, and decided, "He'd go to his room and pertend he's been in all evening. Fust find him, then find his hoss."

Grimes bounded up the narrow stairs to the second floor. "Mistah Thorman," he yelled, drunkenly, "if you think yo're marrying Anne Parsell, yo're crazy—yo're crazy, you sidewinder, you ain't fit for Anne!"

There was no action from any hall door. But men in the lobby heard the bawling challenge. Someone shouted, "Brand'll shoot your gizzard out, kid! You better go home to bed."

Grimes repeated the challenge, then answered the men below: "I'll be any dirty name if I back down, he ain't marrying my gal!"

Just then two doors opened; one at his left, near the head of the stairs; the other, at the further end of the hall. Elma came dashing out of the nearer door. She wore a transparent nightgown, and her dark hair was streaming. "If you're that crazy about her," she cried, "go ahead and good luck, you jughead!"

Brand Thorman stamped into the hall. His boots were dusty, and he saw the dust on Grimes' boots, the alkali and rust and dirt on the frock coat; he saw, and his face changed. He understood.

Elma screamed, "Simon, watch it!"

But Gimes was already whirling from that lovely distraction. Thorman's guns were clearing

leather when the kid from Georgia cut loose. No one, Thorman least of all, believed that any man could get a Colt from a hip pocket and clear of a long frock coat in time to win the exchange.

But Thorman learned. His own shot went wild, just as Grimes' Colt bucked a second time, and knocked a second jet of dust from Thorman's green vest. The big man spun, his knees buckled, and he fell face forward; his smoking gun skated down the hall.

Elma clawed her breast. Her gown was soggy, blood soaked. Before Grimes could catch her, she caught the door jamb, missed, then slumped to the floor.

"Simon—you fool—I told you—mining towns—are poison—did he get you—?" She shivered, held to him with one arm. When he supported her in the crook of his elbow, she smiled. "Kiss me, Simon, you idiot—it's been fun—herding you around—"

The men who came pounding up the stairs checked up short. One said, "Hell, the pore gal's been shot, get a doctor."

"Shot hell!" Grimes choked. "She's dead, and so is that son of a ——!"

HE WAS right. Later that night, he rode to Jim Parsell's house with the marshal, and told of Thorman's trick to palm off stolen coin as gold from a high grade mine. Anne came out, wide eyed, and laid a soft hand on his arm. "Simon, darling," she said, "I'm so sorry about that poor girl. And I'm not angry about the way . . . the way she called my hand. You saved us all, Simon, and—"

Grimes kissed her, then gently thrust her from him. He said to Anne, and to Jim Parsell, and to the marshal: "Folks, you'all been mighty nice, but I'm leaving tonight. I'm going back to my uncle's spread, like Elma wanted me to—" He choked, blinked, then jammed his hat on and ran down the front steps. As he stumbled toward town, he muttered, "Damn it, I wish I'd let her herd me around."

E. Hoffmann Price

Contributes

"Jonah of Los Jacales"

next month

Six-gun Wedding

(Continued from page 41)

the young man called Tinker who had been chased off the Y-R just prior to the forced, six-gun wedding.

"Give it to 'im, Pritchard!" snarled this Tinker.

Barney's .45 came up, lined for the hand-worked vest of Lon Pritchard. The night-clad figure of the girl was too quick for him. She screamed, and she was throwing herself across the line of fire.

"No! He's my husband!" She screamed this at Pritchard and the slack-jawed man. "You're too late! You've been wantin' me, but I'm married! If you shoot—"

Barney was quick to see the shrewdness in Pritchard's shoe button eyes.

"Grab 'er, Tinker, an' git 'er out'n the way," snapped Pritchard. "We've got Comstock dead to rights! Him seizin' an' appropriatin' the Y-R, an' marryin' Sally by force—"

Barney went out of a half crouch. To his mind this whole damn' ruckus was a kind of show bein' put on for him. What Sally had said about him being her husband, as if she was fighting for him, made him a little sick.

AS HE sprang, his sweeping arm knocked Sally to the floor. One of Pritchard's irons blazed, but Barney dived under the slash of fire, his own .45 snapping. He was suddenly sicker, as he realized that was all the gun taken from old Pete Wharton had done. It only snapped again as Barney's hard weight crashed into Lon Pritchard's fat knees.

Why the .45 was unloaded was a question. The only point now was that it was useless for shooting. Powder and lead scored Barney's back and one hip. But his striking weight had unbalanced the broad-bellied Pritchard.

Before the cattle stealing boss of Tepee Flats could bring his guns down to finish him off, Barney used his empty iron as a slugging weapon. He drove the gun and his fist deep into the paunch under the hand-worked vest.

Air exhaled from Pritchard's lungs on a whooshing groan. One of his guns exploded and sent fire through the muscles of Barney's left leg. Vaguely, Barney saw the slack-jawed Tinker edging around, trying to get in a shot with a single gun he was holding.

Pritchard was fat, but he wasn't as soft as he looked. Barney had to stay inside the huge arms, smashing blows into Pritchard's stomach and face, to save himself from the guns the Tepee Flats boss was trying to get into fatal position. Barney heard Sally cry out.

Her figure was a white, flying streak. Tinker's gun blazed. Its lead went wild as the girl, screaming and clawing with all the fury of a mountain cat, hurled herself upon Tinker. Then it was that Pritchard jerked up one big arm, and had the luck to hit Barney's chin

with his knuckles wrapped around a gun.

Barney's senses became confused. He was striking out blindly. He was going out. Guns were crashing outside. Curses and shouts sounded. The wide hallway of the ranch-house thundered under hard boots.

"You got 'im, Pritchard?" yelled a hoarse voice. "C'mon! G'a'-mighty! Them hellers from the Ricos is stampedin' the herd down onto the boys!"

Barney couldn't be sure whether the rising thunder he heard was in his brain or was vibrating from the ground outside. He was aware that the big form of Pritchard was free from him, and that more hombres were pouring into the ranch-house, seeking shelter.

More gunplay started up near the outside door. Barney was lying helpless, his muscles temporarily paralyzed, but his hearing still was partly working. Pritchard's deadly voice spoke.

Barney opened his eyes and saw the broad-bellied boss standing over him, his feet spread apart. The fat rolls of the face and the glint of the beady eyes were one twisted expression of killing rage.

Even with the smashing of guns outside and near the ranch-house door, with the rolling thunder of spooked cattle, Barney caught Pritchard's words.

"I'm finishin' him off, Tinker! But me an' the boys'll be layin' it to you! You come onto Comstock, an' you didn't know he'd hitched up with your cousin, so you gunned 'im down!"

Barney's big body felt to him as light as a feather. As if he had no power. He had no pain. He hadn't any sensation except a madness in his head as he saw Pritchard bring up one of his ornamented guns steadily, his beady eyes behind it.

Barney imagined for an instant that the exploding gun had split his brain wide open. Still his eyes kept their vision, and he could see. A huge weight like a falling ton of hay smothered down upon him.

That touched off whatever nerve center had gone dead. Barney breathed, wriggled, trying to pull himself clear. He was aware it was Pritchard's over-stuffed stomach that was pressing him down. Instead of a bullet, it had been Pritchard's unfired gun that had cracked across his forehead.

AS HE made it from under the inert weight of the Tepee Flats boss, Barney saw Sally sitting on the floor. The slack-jawed Tinker was crumpled down close to her. Blood was seeping from his scalp.

Sally's brown eyes were bigger than ever, and staring. She was holding a six-gun in both her small hands. A little smoke was still drifting from its muzzle. There was a hole and smear of blood under one of Lon Pritchard's ears.

Sally's tanned face was gray and her lips were white. She was talking hoarsely, as if to herself.

"I had to do it—I had to do it—"

Ignoring the still crashing guns and the smashing bedlam of the ruckus outside the room, Barney got to the girl. He took the gun from her hand, and caught her as she closed her eyes and swayed.

The ranch-house rocked and jolted with the swirling tide of

stampeding cattle. Thin screams of men could be heard. Shooting suddenly ceased inside the house, but Barney could hear many men still moving.

Then Matt Gordon's heavy voice boomed above all other sound.

"You damn' rannies! Comb all the rooms! Find the boss! If he's been killed, we're ridin' for Tepee Flats and burnin' that hell's half acre off'n the face o' the earth!"

ALL AT once, Barney Comstock fully realized that the nearly stripped, lovely girl he was holding in his arms was his wife. Only fragments of her nightgown clung to her tempting curves. Barney was up, bringing a bed coverlet to wrap around her when Matt Gordon's big frame filled the doorway.

Matt's mouth flew open and he stared. For Barney was picking the girl up. He was carrying her gently toward the bed.

"Barney!" rapped out Matt. "Them Tepee Flats buzzards are damn' well clipped! We lost a couple-a boys, an' one of the old punchers here was killed! I see you finished off Pritchard! Had we best be ridin' after the herd, an' keep the cows movin' north?"

Barney turned to big Matt. He saw the slack-jawed Tinker slowly pulling himself erect, rubbing his bloody scalp. Pritchard never would move again.

"I guess that's the best idea, Matt," said Barney. "We beat a smart ranny by dumb luck. I ain't savvyin' all of it, an' I guess I ain't wantin' to know too much. Y'see, Matt, if it had been diff'rent with this gal, I'm thinkin' I'd could have wanted her. The way it is—"

"You can have the marriage unlooped in court, the way it happened," said Matt Gordon. "I know how it hits you, Barney."

"You won't have to do anything about the wedding, Mr. Comstock," spoke the low, strained voice of the girl.

As Barney whipped around, she was sitting up in the bed. Her hands held the coverlet up to her white throat. Matt Gordon stared at her. Slack-jawed Tinker was shaking, climbing to his feet.

"No, Mr. Comstock," said the girl. "we're not rightfully hitched. I intended it to be so, but you was knocked out by old Pete before you could say, 'I do.' Judge Sharpe was too drunk to know it, an' he won't remember the ceremony, anyway. So you are free to go, an' I won't ever claim I was your wife."

Barney swallowed a lump that was in his throat. He could see the girl's brown eyes were floating in tears. The slack-jawed Tinker was trying to get past Matt Gordon in the doorway. Matt shoved him back roughly.

The girl said, "Please, let him go. He's my cousin, Tinker Comstock. His trouble was drinking too much and losing all of his money to Lon Pritchard. Tinker was thinking all the time I would marry him, because my dad was kicked by a horse and bad hurt before he died.

"Yes, my name's Sally Comstock. An' dad's head was funny at the last. So he made a will that I'd always have to keep the Y-R spread in the Comstock name by hitchin' up with my cousin, Tinker,

or lose the ranch if I married any other man. So—"

Barney was beginning to understand what had been so dumfounding. That was it. The drunk Judge Sharpe had called the girl Sally Comstock. He broke in.

"So them smart old coots, Pete an' Chuck, and that other one, got an idea when they found out I had a herd in Tepee Flats and that my name was also Comstock?" said Barney. "Is that it?"

"K'rect!" spoke the cracked voice of old Pete Wharton at Matt Gordon's shoulder. "We spied on you, but Chuck an' me made a'mighty sure you was a right an' upstandin' hombre 'fore we brung you to the Y-R for Sally. She wasn't meanin' to hold you to the bargain, 'cept to let you fatten your herd an' light a shuck out'n Tepee Mountains. But when we seen you was a man who wouldn't have no truck with a dance hall gal, an' how you stood up to Lon Pritchard, we had a kind-a idea it might—"

"That's enough, Pete," said Sally firmly. "Now you see how it is, Mr. Comstock. Lon Pritchard always wanted me. He figured if I married my cousin Tinker, he could get rid of him easily. Then, I guess, when he thought I had been hitched up with you, he figured I would still have the name Comstock, and inherit your cattle as your widow."

Barney was watching Sally's wide, brown eyes. She tried to smile, but didn't make much of a success of it.

"So, you can go when you're ready, or you can keep your cattle here until they're ready for market, and I'll not make any claim whatever, Mr. Comstock," said Sally huskily.

Barney walked purposefully toward the bed, limping on his bullet nicked leg.

"My name is Barney," he said quietly. "Sally Comstock, honey, I'm doin' myself the honor of askin' you humbly to give me another chance. Seein' Judge Sharpe already has pronounced us man an' wife, I'm here an' now, in the presence of witnesses, sayin' 'I do!'"

Matt Gordon shoved Tinker Comstock roughly into the hallway.

"Get goin', you polecat!" he said harshly. "Pete, you an' me had best get the boys out an' see if we can round up them rambunctious cows 'fore they run to hell an' gone! I reckon they'll be feedin' a long time on the Comstock Y-R!"

"MISTER EVE" — a different Western story — *next month*

Lynch Bee

(Continued from page 53)

He yelled, "Let her alone! You dirty devils, hiding behind masks!"

Two men turned and stared at him. The first one said, "Well, well. So you snapped out of it. Reckon you'll never go anyplace, and these masks are hot, all right!" He reached up and removed his.

"Henry, Howdy Henry. The guard at the mine!"

"Sure, meet my pal, the other member of our own private Vigilantes." Again a mask came off. "I think you met Flush Donaldson before!"

Flush said, "I got a score to settle with this guy anyway. You take the gal for a while. I'm going to be busy." He walked across the room and kicked Weston in the ribs. Weston rolled away, tried to fight his way to his feet.

"Hold it," said a voice from the door. "Howdy, Vigilante Henry, and Vigilante Donaldson. Thought maybe this feller wasn't as smart as he pretended, so I kept watch on the jail."

Weston said weakly, "Nugget Nell!"

"Sure, in person. You, Flush, untie the little lady. You, Hawk, stand still."

But Hawk made a mistake. He dove for a gun. Imperturbably, Nugget Nell shot him through the belt buckle.

DAWN, a dirty grey dawn back in Hawksville, came up over the eastern mountains. Pinkerton Detective Weston groaned in his sleep. At last he yelled, "Get away from that door!" But the knocking on his hotel door persisted, a voice called, "Jim, Jim, get up!"

He opened the door. It was Marge. She said, "It's Flush Donaldson! They've taken him out of jail and they're going to lynch him! Come on!"

A few minutes later Weston faced the angry crowd, the crowd about the Vigilante tree. At the very edge, some fifty feet from the rim of the crowd, King Tillot sat in a buckboard, behind the fastest greys in the county. He nodded.

Weston said, "Men, I was brought here to prevent such things as this. You don't want to hang this man, let's take him to the county seat and let him face the law, the real law!"

"Get down from there, mister. You had a chance; you should have killed him yourself!"

"Wait, men, I've earned the right to say a few words!" He crawled up on the ladder on which the trembling Donaldson poised. There he paused long enough to deliberately light a crooked stogie. "I made myself bait in a trap, men," he said. "I deliberately fixed it, with the aid of Nugget Nell, that these 3-7-77 criminals would come after me. I caught them, with Nell's help. Why don't you listen to me?"

"Get down from there! Take the Pinkerton down! Remember the cook at the B in the Box, remember

the poor watchman at the mine. This man has to hang!"

Over in the buckboard, Tillot nodded. Now Brennan, of the B in a Box had crawled up beside him. Both substantial citizens, both grim men, nodding at Weston on the ladder.

Weston saw the crowd surge toward him. He reached both hands. "Wait, men, wait!"

The cigar's red eye touched a fast fuse along the limb above his head. The thing in his left hand was a knife. The tree itself seemed to let go with a tremendous blast and a splintering roar that left a pall of black smoke in its wake. Down came Donaldson, and on him leaped Weston. Someway he fought his way toward the buckboard. Someway he found willing hands reaching down to drag Donaldson into the buckboard. Then hooves flashed, the buckboard leaped away.

Afterward Weston whispered to Marge, "You see I figured the fake vigilantes would try to hang me at the Vigilante tree. I meant to ask for a last smoke and set off that black powder blast I'd fixed early in the evening then. But Donaldson managed to listen in on our plans, and we damned near didn't make it!"

She kissed him. "Any way, that horrid tree is gone, the hanging tree is blasted. And there'll be no more hanging in Hawksville!"

"Except the way I hang onto you," sighed Weston, and held her all the closer.

Girl in the Saddle

(Continued from page 61)

the corral bars, a gun in each hand, firing coolly, mercilessly at the mounted men. He saw men pitch from their saddles with astonished looks on their faces, saw horses rearing up as their riders spurred them to make them curvet and thus become more difficult targets.

He heard startled yells from the small 'dobe building behind him where Don Jorge's vaqueros bunked, but none of them dared come out to his assistance, not knowing what the shooting was about. Red saw one man, way to the left, drawing a careful bead on him and he snapped a shot at him. The gun dropped from the man's hand and then, just as he swayed in his saddle, a gun boomed to Red's right. He felt a terrific blow, followed by a searing pain on the top of his head. A star seemed to explode in his brain. He tried to stay on his feet but his body was suddenly strengthless. Then he pitched forward on his face and knew no more. . . .

THE inside of Red's skull felt as if it were seething with molten lead. It was so heavy he could not lift it, and his eyes were gummed together by something sticky. He tried to raise his hand to the place on his temple that throbbed like the pounding of an Indian war drum but he could not

move them. He blinked his eyes again and again and finally the lids parted and he stared around him.

He was sitting on a chair but the chair's back was in front of him, his chin resting on the topmost cross piece. His hands were tied together in front of him and lashed to the chair also. His eyes blinked again as they gradually became accustomed to the bright sunlight that filled the room, then he saw something that he remembered seeing before; a huge fireplace with a curiously wrought, iron hood. He had eaten in front of that fireplace the other day when the young Mexican had given him a whole new set of clothes . . . and then it all came back to him! He was in Ramon Quierrez's hacienda!

His tortured brain was still fitting the fragments of the puzzle together when he heard the door opening and he turned his head. It swung back with a bang and he saw two swarthy Mexicans standing there with Winchester carbines in their hands. They grinned evilly at him for a moment, then stepped back and saluted someone, and there was Conchita with Ramon behind her!

"Red!" gasped Conchita, her eyes dark with pain at the sight of his bloody face. "Ah, *querido mio!* They told me you were dead!"

She tried to run to him, clutching the blanket that was still wrapped around her, but Ramon grabbed her by the shoulder and threw her down on the sofa that was against the wall.

"No, Conchita," said Ramon, his white teeth flashing in a poisonous smile. "You misunderstood me. I did not say he *was* dead. I said he soon *would* be. One of my men aimed a little too high last night and the bullet only creased his hard Yankee skull, rendering him unconscious."

"Stinkin' coyote!" growled Red. "If I had my hands free. . . ."

Ramon shrugged and patted the two gun holsters that swung from his ornate belt.

"If you had your hands free I would be under the necessity of putting a bullet through you," he said. "Instead of letting my men do it for me."

"Listen, Conchita," said Red. "Last night I told you that when I saw you again I'd tell you who held up your uncle's paymaster and robbed him. Well, I can tell you now. The bandit's name is Ramon Quierrez!"

Conchita stared wide eyed at him and then at Ramon. Ramon calmly put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

"That is correct, my gringo friend," he said. "Quite correct." He turned to Conchita. "It is very simple. I will explain so that you may come to admire your husband-to-be. I needed money. I knew that Gomez, paymaster for your uncle's mines, would have a large sum with him. I buy a set of gringo clothes; chaps, shirt, kerchief. I am masked so that I cannot be recognized. When I hold up Gomez I talk with a gringo accent and behold! Gomez swears it was a gringo who robbed him. But," he held up a finger, "the intelligence of my plan only now shows itself. This one," he jerked his head toward Red, "stops at my hacienda. I am a good Samaritan. I give him the clothes I wore during the robbery. I give

him some of the money I took and I send him to Taxco where I know Gomez will recognize the clothes. Is it not beautiful?" and he smiled in self appreciation.

"And then," said Conchita, her eyes wide with horror. "You came and kidnaped me, knowing that he had been seen near our hacienda and would be blamed for that as well!"

"Blamed not only for that," said Ramon, "but also for the murder of your uncle! Ah, I am a genius! I wanted you before as a woman, and now, my dove, you are not only a desirable woman but an heiress as well! With your uncle dead it is you who will inherit the mine and I, as your husband, who will reap the benefits of it!"

"Not while I live!" gritted Red.

"That is just the point, my red-headed friend," said Ramon. "Not while you live. And still, I had use for you, that is why I brought you along last night instead of shooting you when I discovered you were still alive. In a little while I shall take you to the door and turn you loose. You will start running wildly. You will run fifty, sixty yards, then a volley will ring out and you will fall, riddled by bullets. You see? You kidnaped Conchita here. I shot you and rescued her . . . and in gratitude she married me."

"Never!" sobbed Conchita. "Never!"

"Oh, yes, you will marry me," said Ramon. "There are things I learned from the Indians that will make even strong men cry and beg for death. Molten lead applied to tender flesh. . . ."

"God, you beast!" gritted Red. "I'd give my life for just two minutes. . . ." He strained, snarling, at the thongs that bound him until they cut deep into his flesh, but he could not loosen them.

Ramon looked at him with a tigerish gleam in his dark eyes.

"I think, *mi amigo,*" he said, "that we shall let you witness something before you die, how Ramon Quierrez tames the woman of his choice. There is one thing that is more precious to our Mexican women than life itself, and that is their honor! I think I will let you see how willing and submissive Conchita will become beneath a strong man's wooing. Come, Conchita," he hissed, "show our red-headed friend how a Mexican woman can love!"

WITH a scream Conchita whirled away from him and ran to the door. She tried to open it but it was locked and before she could turn the key, Ramon was on her. He grabbed one corner of the blanket that swathed her shrinking form, but she dropped it from her and leaped away.

She crouched there a moment, eyes dilated, then as Ramon, his face alight with bestial gloating, leaped for her, she darted across the room with the race and speed of a startled fawn.

Round and round the room they ran, while Red, cursing and biting his lips until they bled, strained at his bonds like a madman. Ramon was playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse, the pursuit seeming to stimulate his brutality even further. He would clutch for her and just hook the neck of her night dress, his taloned fingers ripping the sheer fabric, the torn silk hang-

ing down and exposing more of her exquisite form, then he would let her escape again.

Now he had her pinned in a corner, and with a snarl that was more animal than human, he had caught her in his arms. He pressed his mouth to hers, crushing her twisting body against his own. A moment she resisted, fighting, clawing like a wild cat, then suddenly, with a low moan, her body went limp.

"Oh, yes, Ramon," she breathed. "Yes. I too love you! I know it now! And as for that redheaded pig. . . ." She drew back her head and spat at Red. "That!"

As Red gazed wide eyed in horror, his brain a churning maelstrom of disbelief, Ramon crushed the girl at last in his arms with a hoarse yell of triumph.

Try as Red would, he could not turn his head away. He saw the Mexican seize her mouth with his in a fierce kiss, and a cold sweat bathed his body. He saw her slide her arms invitingly about him, let them drop to his waist and then, with the quickness of light, Conchita seized Ramon's guns in his holsters! It had all been a ruse to distract him!

SHE whipped one of the guns out of the holster and tried to lift it, but with a yell of rage, Ramon grabbed her wrist and she did not have time to fire. Instead she drew her arm back away from him and then threw the gun towards Red.

"Quick, Red!" she screamed.

Red watched the gun come hurtling towards him with eyes that were cold as ice. His wrists were crossed and lashed to the chair and he could not move anything but his hands. The gun turned over slowly, then with a lunge of his body, Red moved the chair a few inches to the right and caught the weapon. His fingers gripped it low down on the butt and for one hellish moment he thought he was going to drop it, then his hands slid up and his index finger hooked through the trigger guard.

Ramon had dived for the other gun and now was whirling around, murder in his eyes. The two shots boomed out almost together but Red's was first by a split second. He felt the heat of Ramon's slug as it whizzed past his ear and buried itself in the 'dobe wall, but his own bullet had not missed. Too much depended on it.

Ramon stood there for a moment, looking down at the red stain that spread over his chest with surprised eyes, then there was a thud as the gun dropped from his nerveless fingers and he fell forward on his face and lay still.

THERE were excited yells from outside the door and then the sound of battering gun butts. Conchita started to run towards Red but he waved her aside out of line of fire. Then the door burst open with a crash and the two guards pounded into the room. One of them started to throw up his rifle and he saw Death in the form of a redheaded man lashed to a chair, blood on his cold face and a six gun gripped in both hands. The gun barked and the rifle thudded to the floor.

The other guard let his rifle fall of its own accord and his hands

shot skyward. *He* was privileged. He saw the most beautiful woman he had ever dreamed of run to the redheaded devil and press such a burning kiss to his lips that he blinked his eyes and let out a sigh which seemed to come from the tips of his boots.

Whip Hand

(Continued from page 69)

Santa Anna. Their very lives were in the balance. Including Mary's. He had seen the awful sight of white women ravaged by the Mexicans and Indians, and he knew that was the fate in store for other white women unless a stop was put to it. Those guns he was bringing in would be turned against the whites—yes, even against Mary, herself, possibly.

THERE came a sudden interruption as a rider slid off a galloping horse outside the store and ran inside. His clothes were sweat-soaked and his face dust-rimmed.

"The Mexicans are coming—a whole troop of them," he shouted. "Where's Lane and Plunkett?"

Lane and Plunkett and Mary Lane came hastily out of the office. "What's that?" Lane demanded.

"I was down the river runnin' my traps when I seen a troop o' greasers breakin' camp and headin' this way. I caught one that stopped to water his horse and made him talk. They're comin' on a gun raid, and they're ordered to shoot everybody that don't turn up his gun."

"It's come!" Lane said gravely. "It means fight or be butchered. And we ain't got enough guns and ammunition to defend ourselves."

Tom Rider looked at the muzzle of the pistol that peaked over the table at him, and then into the cold eyes of Buffalo Baxter, and of Mearson. They watched him like a hawk, and their looks threatened instant death if he opened his mouth.

Suddenly he raised up, his two hands gripping the edge of the table. He lifted it up with him and upset it squarely on Mearson and his party. As he slammed it over the dishes rattled to the floor and the weight of it sent Mearson and Baxter and the girl over backward in their chairs.

Buffalo Baxter pulled the trigger of his weapon and the bullet roared out and buried itself in the ceiling. Tom Rider was over him. He kicked the gun out of the man's hand and sent it sailing across the room.

"Yes we have got guns, Mr. Lane," he shouted. "You'll find plenty of them—"

A knife from the hand of the fallen Mearson sailed through the air and caught him in the neck, its gleaming blade biting into the skin and spinning him around while the blood spurted from the wound like a red well.

Mearson scrambled to his feet as Rider clapped his hand to the wound, grabbing a chair as he got up, snarling curses. He threw the chair with deadly aim, and one leg of it caught Rider squarely in the

forehead. He fell like a calf under a butcher's axe, and lay unconscious on the floor—not having been able to reveal the hiding place of the guns.

Mary Lane slid behind the counter of the store, felt under the counter and brought out a buffalo gun, resting its heavy barrel across the counter. "Don't make another move, Mearson," she said with deadly coldness. "And Baxter, drop that knife you're trying to draw."

The heavy weapon loomed like a cannon aimed at the men, and they stopped their movements. "Dad," the girl said, "Take this gun and watch them while I revive Tom."

A TEN minute interval during which she bathed his head and staunched the flow of blood, finally brought Rider around. "Where are those guns, Tom?" she pleaded, as she sat with his head in her lap. She was on the floor, caressing the wounded trader and watching for the first move of his eyes that would show signs of returning consciousness.

Half in a daze, hardly knowing what he was saying, he felt his head on her lap and her tender fingers soothing him. "In the second cutbank up the river from the trail that runs back to Mearson's store," he said. "Hidden in the cattails." And then he didn't know anything for a long time after that.

When he did regain consciousness he found himself still in the girl's arms, but the surroundings were strange to him. He was lying on the ground and not in Lane's store, and as his eyes half opened he saw a campfire at a distance.

"What happened?" he asked puzzled.

The girl was sitting on the ground and it was dark, and he was lying down with his head in her lap. The girl leaned over him and kissed him on the mouth. "Don't talk yet, Tom, you're badly wounded."

"Oh, that knife scratch. That wasn't anything."

"That's not all," the girl said.

"It's all I remember."

"Then you don't know half of it," the girl said. "When you told us where the guns were, dad and the rest of the men went and got them while others put up a barricade at the edge of the road the Mexicans were coming in on. Then they made all the women and children come here for safety."

"Just where are we?"

"Wait until I finish," the girl said. "We're at Mearson's. Mearson and Baxter put up a fight to keep us from getting the guns, and the men killed them. The girl went over to the Mexicans. But anyway, they had a battle and they killed and drove off all the Mexicans, and none of the women or children were harmed. They didn't get a gun. Dad says it means war now, and that now everybody will support Houston in his demand for independence."

"And where was I all this time?"

"You? Why you were in it. I tried to stop you on account of the cut on your neck, but you pushed me away, and you were in the middle of the fighting all the time. Dad says you must have killed twenty of the Mexicans yourself."

"I'm sure sorry I missed know-

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ing about that," Rider said. "How come I got here?"

"One of the last Mexican's bullets got you in the leg. If you'll notice a little thing like that maybe you'd realize that you were shot. They brought you out here for the women to take care of."

"What women? there's only one woman I want to take care of me."

"She went with the Mexicans I told you," the girl said in a queer voice.

"She did not," Rider answered, slipping his arm around her. "She's right here now, and I've got a great deal to tell her about how sorry I am that—"

"Don't tell me," the girl said. "After all, she was pretty, and I'm not so pretty—am I?"

TOM RIDER'S hand encircled her body, felt the soft warm curves of her. He turned his head slightly and buried his mouth against her lips, and his lips drank of their sweetness. His hungry arms went about her. . . .

She took them away gently. "You're supposed to be wounded," she offered in feeble objection.

"I am not wounded enough to play dead right now," he answered. "And I'd have to have more than a knife and a Mexican's bullet in me to stop me. I've traveled a long way to get back to you—and now that I have you—"

"What?"

"What do you think?"

The girl was running her soft fingers through his hair. Her body glued to his, her heart throbbed in unison with his.

"I don't think," she whispered. "I can only feel. I can't tell you."

"You won't have to," he said. "Just keep on feeling."

It was dark around them, and all through the rest of the tense night there came from the little dell where they were only the whisperings of love. War tomorrow—possibly—but tonight there was love.

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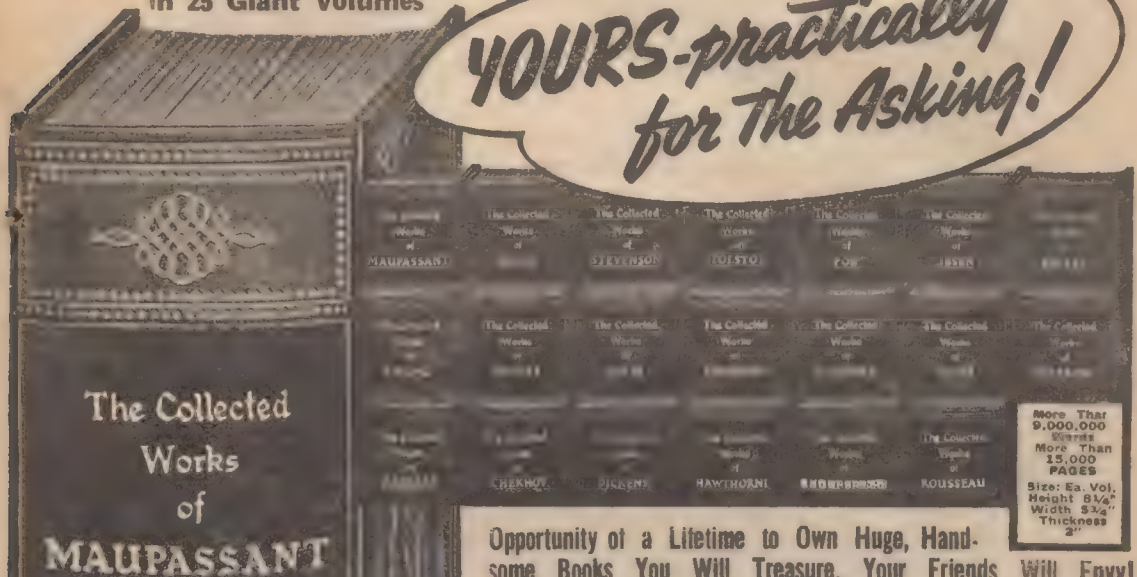
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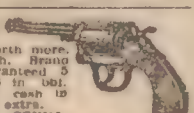

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Death Threat

(Continued from page 77)

sonal grudge vented against a customer. His momentary alarm now seemed unwarranted.

AT THE head of the stairs, Dolores opened the door of a small room that faced the second floor hallway, closed it after him, and barred it. Then she struck light to a kerosene lamp and for a moment regarded Brad.

"Kees me, Americano," she demanded, arms creeping about his neck.

She was warm and glamorous, a golden brown length of dusky loveliness as she clung to him, each lithe curve raising his temperature another degree. Dolores sighed, shuddered ecstatically as he drew her to him. Soon she'd be ripe for questioning . . .

"Yo're sort of new here, ain't yuh, honey?" queried Brad as she finally slipped from his arms and looked up at him with glowing eyes.

"I 'ave been here seex week already."

"Bet yo're from Guadalajara?"

"Si." Whether she was or not, the compliment delighted her; the loveliest women of all Mexico are found in that city.

Presently, Brad was learning things. Maude Hillis had arrived from Las Cruces only a week ago. Oviedo was Slick Dargan's scout, looking for recruits. Then, with kisses and drinks, he cajoled her into further chattering.

She frowned when he described Gwenn, then suddenly brightened

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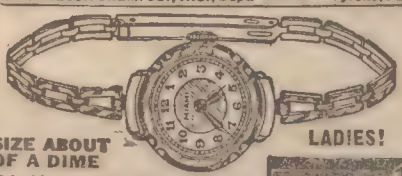

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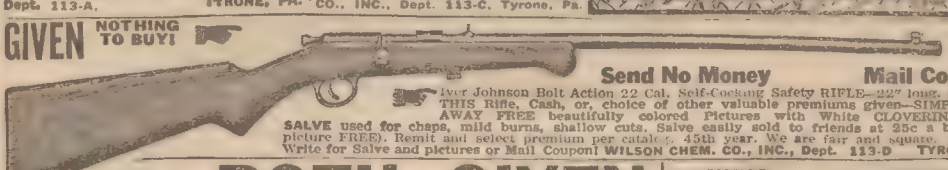

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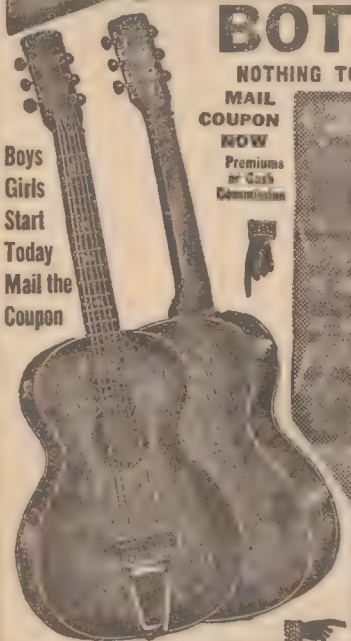

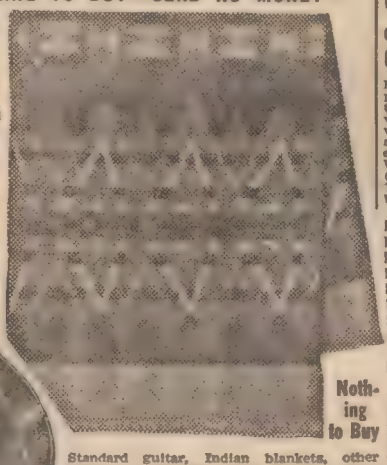

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and said, *"Seguramente!* There was a girl, joost the other night. But she ees not in the *Molino*. Not yet. First, that peeg of a Dargan takes her to his own house. Like he took me, an' tol' me I would be his one an' only *querida*."

The wrathful gleam of her eyes suggested Wilson's next play: "Yo're a sweet gal, Dolores, an' he done yuh dirt. Tell me whar he's got her, an' I'll git her away, an' that skunk of a Dargan'll give yuh yore old home."

"Oh, my brave Americano! But first, I weel kiss you to death—"

She tried to, and nearly succeeded; but finally she gave Brad the dive keeper's address, and concluded, "Take the stairs leading to the back. Then no wan weel see you. None of those enemy you feared."

Nothing to do now but raid Dargan's house. Safety, however, required one precaution that Brad would rather have omitted. Her readiness to talk to him had made him doubtful of her discretion.

DOLORES never knew what struck her. She crumpled under a well planted tap of his fist; and in a moment, she was neatly gagged, tied, and thrust into a clothes closet.

That done, he descended the back stairs, emerging in a narrow alley whose blackness led to a moonlit cross street. The coast was clear; or so he thought until, passing a dark doorway, he heard a warning creak.

A stair tread had protested against a shift of weight. Wilson, tense and alert, whirled as a man hurled himself from cover. A knife gleamed; but while the

American's sudden shift kept the blade from finding its mark, his assailant's lunge toppled him over.

They crashed to the ground. Wilson, knocked breathless by the impact, was momentarily stunned. Instinctively, one hand jerked to his holster; but he dared not risk a disturbance which would ruin his chance of finding Gwenn. He held his fire, and rolled to one side.

The descending blade, missing his back, jabbed his shoulder. His assailant, feeling the steel bite in, relaxed. Wilson's knee drove home, a solar plexus blow deadly as a mule kick.

For a moment Brad stared at the man who lay there, twitching and fighting for breath. It was Oviedo, Dargan's scout. He must have seen Wilson during the short stay on the ground floor; or else Maude, seeking vengeance for her lover's death in Las Cruces, had put him on the job.

The barrel of the .45 smashed down. Bone crunched, and while a second blow was needless, Wilson hammered home: an extra one for Gwenn. That left it a laugh on Maude Hillis. The path was clear.

Brad needed a horse, but there was too much risk of picking a beast whose rider was about to leave the Molino. And that, with Maude Hillis impatient to hear Oviedo's tale of vengeance executed, would soon make Wilson's presence in Juarez entirely too conspicuous.

Finally, someone would be wondering why Dolores was not back on the dance floor. Once she was released, there'd be hell to pay!

So instead of stealing a horse, Brad took a rawhide *riata* from a saddle, then set out for Dargan's

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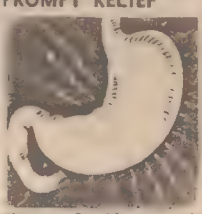

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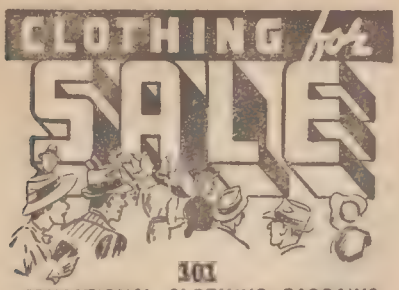

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house at the edge of town.

The rope, as he had anticipated, solved his problem. Dargan's residence was a two story *'dobe* whose flat roof was supported by beams that projected a foot or more from the wall. A single deft cast of the *riata* put a loop about the end of a joist; and he lost no time drawing himself up, hand over hand.

Once over the parapet, he pulled the rope up after him, then let it down into the dark inner courtyard, and made a silent descent.

The windows opening into the patio were dark. Gwenn might be in any one of the numerous rooms of that *'dobe* fortress, and search would be hazardous; but that was a risk he could not avoid.

Brad headed for a vaulted passageway that led toward the front. Once in that black tunnel, he heard the snoring of the porter on guard at the entrance. Guided by the sound, he crept stealthily into the gloom, and the reek of garlic kept the echoes from deceiving him. His fingers closed on a man's shoulder. The fellow started, muttered.

"Git on yore hoofs!" whispered Wilson, the muzzle of his .45 prodding the porter. "An' ef yuh let out one yeep, I'll blow your liver around yore backbone! Whar's that Americano gal?"

"*Señor,* I can not tell you—he will keel me!"

BRAD booted him down the passageway; and as they halted at the stairs that led up to the second floor of either wing, he said, "Yuh'll live longer ef I leave yuh fur yore boss tuh kill, ef yo're dumb enough tuh wait fer him."

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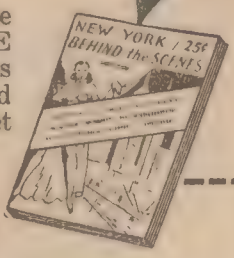

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"To the right, *señor*," whispered the porter, moved by sound logic. "And do not shoot, *por amor de dios!*"

He led the way upstairs. At the end of the hall he paused at a door, fumbled with his keys. A lock grated. Brad prodded the porter over the threshold.

Gwenn, clad only in the remains of her slip, lay on a pallet near the wall. Her hair was gilded by the moonglow, and her half revealed body seemed marble white. She stirred restlessly, moaned in her sleep; then, suddenly aroused, she sat up.

"Shhh!" warned Brad. "Honey, it's me. I snuck over tuh git yuh."

"Oh — Brad — how —?" With trembling hands she struck a match.

Wilson, glancing about the sparsely furnished room, saw a long, heavy chest.

"Pile in!" he commanded, nudging the porter with his .45. "An' stay there till I tell yuh tuh come out. Then, as the lid closed on the captive, "Git yore shoes, honey! Quick!"

"He took all my clothes. All but what I've got on."

"Sit down on that chest while I cut up that blanket," said Wilson, drawing his knife. "An' wrap the pieces about yore hoofs, jest in case I kain't steal a hoss 'thout bein' conspikiyus."

He knelt, slicing the blanket; but he had scarcely muffled one foot when the door opened, and lantern light invaded the room. Slick Dargan, pistol drawn, stood in the doorway.

"Grab yore ears, Brad!" he commanded. "Oviedo made a mess

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of it, but yore number's up this play."

Wilson, caught flat footed, raised his hands. Then he saw the red-haired woman who entered the room on Dargan's heels: Maude Hillis, eyes narrow and catlike, face paper white.

"Let me at him, Slick!" she demanded, voice low and venomous. "He killed my side kick in Las Cruces."

"I guess yuh deserve something fer tellin' me he killed Oviedo," Dargan chuckled. "Grab my left gun."

Wilson, fascinated, saw the play and ripple of her white body, the quiver of her breasts, behind that scarf of scarlet gauze. Brad Wilson, who had killed many men, was about to die by a woman's hand.

He watched those slim white fingers pluck aside the skirt of Dargan's frock coat, exposing the pistol butt that projected from his waistband. And then whipped to desperation, Wilson tensed for his once chance.

"It's a hair trigger, Maude," warned the dive keeper as the girl's fingers closed on the butt of the spare weapon.

His glance shifted; only for an instant, but enough for Wilson's uncanny speed. His weapon coughed flame past the holster's edge. Dargan reeled, jerking a wild shot.

Gwenn, diving to the floor, ducked the bullet. Wilson hurled himself aside. The room became a cross fire of spurting flame and screaming lead.

Dargan, dropping, fired with dying fury, even as his body jerked

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from the impact of Wilson's bullets. Maude was squeezing slugs until she emptied the heavy weapon—but none hit Brad.

Wilson whipped about before he understood why a bullet had nicked him from the rear: a shot fired by the porter, who had bobbed up out of his prison when Gwenn dropped from the lid.

The fellow, riddled and coughing blood, collapsed as he tried to regain his fuming gun. Maude, shoulder reddened and arm limp, dropped her pistol. It was her fire which had killed the porter.

"What the hell?" demanded Wilson. "Gwenn, fix up yore other hoof!"

"There's horses in the stable—in the far corner of the court—grab Dargan's keys!" panted Maude. "Hurry—never mind my arm!"

IT WAS still too thick for Brad, but as he set new records in saddling up, the red head gasped out the answers: "Oviedo recognized you and sent Dolores to trap you. I listened at her door, heard her give you directions, and knew it was an ambush. I couldn't warn you—"

"Warn me?" scoffed Brad, tugging at a latigo strap, "How come?"

"Because, there in Las Cruces, you were so nice about it, instead of knocking my head off, like I deserved, after you killed Hillis. That opened my eyes. Anyway, you killed Oviedo just as I got a chance to warn you. So I told Dargan what you'd done."

"What?"

"Yes. Dargan tricked me into that awful Molino del Rey—King's Mill, only I've got a better name for it. The girls never leave that devil's den. No clothes and too many guards. So I bargained with Dargan and convinced him I wanted to kill you, and he believed me. That way, I got my only chance of escaping with you.

"I figured," concluded Maude, as he boosted her to her horse, "on turning Dargan's own gun against him, but you took an insane chance and shot him first."

"Mebbe I warn't so fur wrong about yuh the first time," chuckled Brad, bounding to the saddle and drawing Gwenn up in front of him. "Or mebbe the devil's mill grinds out nice gals. Now yuh ladies better let down yore hair. It's goin' tuh be right smart cold, ridin' tuhnight!"

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Sleepy Mountain Law

(Continued from page 89)

assorted Wilkinses and some other hillbillies.

Lem Moran got his Adam's Apple back into place. Color returned to his face. With Sally Dunlap confronting him, he didn't dare deny having received any money. But he blurted out the truth.

"Dangnation!" he squawked. "Yuh did gimme six hund'ed tax money, an' Sally was a witness, but yuh come back an' got it right after that."

Sheriff Billy's thumb touched his gun, but he judged he hadn't a chance against the bristling weapons of the Sleepy Mountaineers. Nevertheless, his voice was cold and hard.

"You can't run that ranny on me, Lem!" he snapped. "Sally saw me give you the six hund'ed, an' I ain't been back to now! Stealin' tax money that belongs to Trianca County is a hangin' crime! So fork it over!"

Sheriff Billy's short gun was in his hand, centered upon Lem's wishbone. He glanced at Sally. The hell whizzer's face was set and her voice was hard.

"Yuh tryin' to keep that tax money, Lem Moran?" she demanded. "Yuh're plain lyin' when yuh say Sheriff Billy come back an' got the six hund'ed I seen him give yuh! He ain't been away from me since that time, an' I'm right proud to say it!"

"It's a hold up!" squawked Lem Moran. "Sally, yuh're not sidin' with a flatlander! An' yuh ain't tellin' the truth!"

The cracked voice of old Jim Dunlap rang out. His old musket was pointed.

"Don't yuh be makin' out my gran'datter's mishandlin' the truth!" he cackled. "Yuh fork over that tax money, Lem Moran!"

WHITE and shaken, Lem Moran turned to the safe, twirling the dial. There was no movement for the half minute he was taking the six hundred dollars he had first received from Sheriff Billy the night before from the old iron box.

Sheriff Billy saw big Jake Rucker sidestepping away from the other hillbillies, his squirrel rifle held over his arm. He scooped up the worn bills though, before he turned.

"Git away from my gal!" roared big Jake Rucker. "An' yuh ain't gittin' off the mountain with no dinero! Git to one side, Sally!"

Sally cried out and tried to get between big Jake and Sheriff Billy. But Sheriff Billy suddenly swept her to one side. Now he was sure he could be quicker with his short gun than big Jake with the long rifle. He could drill the raging Jake Rucker and drop him cold.

But if he did, he would have killed a Sleepy Mountaineer. He would never leave the mountain alive, and the feuding Ruckers would be more than ever set against the flatland law, with their neighbors behind them.

It flashed through Sheriff Billy's brain that there was one other way, and one only. Killing a Sleepy Mountaineer was one thing, but licking him in his boots without a gun was a horse of another color.

Sheriff Billy thought all of this, even as his arm swept Sally to one side and the hammer on big Jake's rifle clicked. The knot of Ruckers and other hill cowmen was frozen.

"No, Billy! No!"

That was Sally screaming out. For Sheriff Billy had acted instantly upon his thought. He flipped his .45 from his hand. As it bounced on the floor, big Jake's rifle exploded wickedly.

Big Jake was sidestepping as he fired, prepared for a blast of gunsmoke from Sheriff Billy's revolver. He was not set for a miss with the rifle, nor was he prepared for the long, sliding dive that Sheriff Billy made straight for his knees.

Sheriff Billy's unexpected barehanded attack was all that caused big Jake's rifle lead to miss him by the breadth of a few hairs. As Sheriff Billy's shoulder hit his knees, big Jake bellowed with profane rage, striking downward at him with the barrel of his weapon.

Outweighing the lighter lawman by fifty pounds, the swinging down of the awkward rifle was the worst move big Jake could have made. Sheriff Billy's hard head rammed into big Jake's stomach. Big Jake's rifle barrel cracked the calf of one leg and numbed it, but the fast-moving lawman had a trick or two that the raging mountaineer had never met up with.

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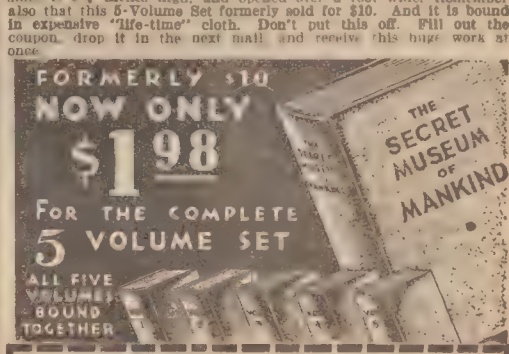

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Big Jake attempted to seize the lawman in his bone crushing arms. Sheriff Billy's hard fists hammered home in a style of fighting that was entirely foreign to what was known on the mountain as "rasslin'."

Then big Jake got a half hold and Sheriff Billy felt a rib crack. It was that which filled him with a final fury of strength. He shot in a short punch that caught big Jake flush on the chin, snapped his head back and barely missed breaking his neck.

Big Jake groaned once, rolled over, and went to sleep.

Sheriff Billy came to his feet, his face bloody, but his hands empty. He was facing the rifles of other Ruckers, of the Wilkinses and of other mountaineers.

For long, slow seconds Sheriff Billy stood there looking at them. Then the bearded Ruckers looked disgustedly at big Jake asleep on the floor. The rifles slowly lowered.

This flatland sheriff could have killed a Rucker. Instead, he had licked him down to his boots with his bare hands.

Then it was that one of the Ruckers burst out, "That damn' Lem Moran's still got six hund'ed o' the tax money! He bragged to Jake he had it! I'm sayin' we give 'im the hidin' he's got comin'!"

"No! I hain't got it! I'm tellin' yuh—" Lem was squawking.

But the roaring Ruckers were sweeping toward the hotel desk.

Lem Moran turned and dived for the back door. He went through it running, with the Ruckers stringing after him.

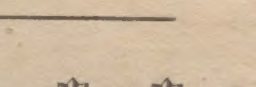
Old Jim Dunlap cackled, "I'm opinin' Trianca County's got a lawman what Sleepy Mountain folks kin trust! I'm sayin' as long as Sheriff Billy's doin' the collectin', we're payin' our rightful taxes!"

All of the assorted Wilkinses nodded their heads solemnly. A growl of agreement went up from others. Then it was that old Jim limped over to Sheriff Billy and Sally, his musket pointed.

"Never thunk a flatlander would be hitchin' up with a Dunlap," he said. "But jest so there won't be no mistake, we'll be moseyin' along over to the squire's an' see that everything's fitten an' proper."

Sheriff Billy's arm went around the Sleepy Mountain hell whizzer. He grinned down at Sally.

"Reckon I'm the only sheriff that's ever c'lected Sleepy Mountain taxes an' a shotgun weddin' for int'rest on the same," he chuckled grimly.



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